LAST HOPE RANCH

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Madison Square

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by

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Packed with excitement and adventure — accented with the whiz of bullets and the beat of horses — here is a grand Western in the finest Seltzer tradition.

Lisbeth Stanton, guarding the outhouse in which she had locked the desperate and drunken Mexican, welcomed with relief the handsome stranger. For she was alone on the ranch, her father having gone on a fruitless journey to obtain replacements for the hands who had mysteriously taken their time and departed — and the door seemed to be weakening under the Mexican's blows! But when the stranger turned out to be a famous — and many times wanted — outlaw . . . . .

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This book is *complete* and *unabridged!* From first page to last it is exactly as the author wrote it and as originally published at the higher price. The low price is made possible by printing from the original plates and by the acceptance of a reduced royalty.

Love to Jack

April - 24 - 1945

"Julie"

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PRINTED IN U. S. A.

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CHAPTER I

THE STRANGER

PHILIPPE MENDEZO'S drunken curses did not affect Lisbeth Stanton; that is, they affected her very little externally, for she sat very still on the veranda, not over a dozen yards from the chollahouse door listening to the profanity that issued from beyond it. Mendezo took his incarceration ungraciously.

Mendezo had been disappointed, for he had dared to dream of playing the rôle of a Don Juan, taking advantage of Lisbeth's isolation. He had not, perhaps, realized that his romantic visions would turn into a nightmare of violence at the first sign of ridicule or repulse.

If Lisbeth had not been able to think just a shade quicker than Mendezo, or if there had not been exact coördination between Lisbeth's brain and muscles, she would not now have been sitting on the veranda, a rifle across her knees, watching the closed door of

the cholla-house and wondering if she would have the courage to shoot Mendezo if he succeeded in breaking out.

Yes, outwardly she was calm. She would shoot Mendezo, of course, and Mendezo deserved shooting. And yet it would be much better all around if her father would come and take Mendezo off her hands.

But Stanton was not coming. Lisbeth could see thirty miles of sun-scorched desert from where she sat; she had been watching it for more than two hours and there had been no sign of a horseman.

Half a dozen times she had followed the movements of spiraling dust-clouds, watching them sail their eccentric way toward her; and she had not been able to convince herself that they really were dust-clouds until she saw them disintegrate and flatten to the floor of the desert. Her hopes had flattened with them. Never a rider came out of one of the dust-clouds. Her father was two days overdue.

The gray floor of the desert was appalling, vast, and desolate. She had never liked the desert. It had always seemed to her as though it were crouching, waiting, mocking. Waiting for her to enter it, alone! Well, she had never done that, and she never would, for its brooding calm terrified her, its whispered menace seemed to be meant for her ears alone.

Beautiful it certainly was, with its changing colors, its veils of rose and amethyst and pearl and saffron, its mystery and its alluring smoothness. But it seemed she had a subtle sense that enabled her to penetrate its mask of beauty, to discern the sinister ugliness behind.

That ugliness came now. There was no one in the big house, no one in the bunk-house that stood near the little stream of water ironically called "Big" Sandy, that trickled eastward past the foot of the slope that began just beyond the cholla-house.

The sinister face of the desert came very close; she could understand its voice, telling her that Philippe was a child of the desert who had been trustworthy until now. Until now! The "now" was important. She lived now.

The past was memory, the future uncertain; the present must be lived. And the present held Mendezo. Mendezo was trying to burst through the door of the cholla-house.

She had not yet recovered from the sinking feeling that had beset her when she had become aware that Mendezo was drunk and that there was a light in his eyes that she did not understand. Self-effacing, deferential as usual, Mendezo had invited her into the cholla-house to inspect some seeds that he had brought from Wilcox the day before.

While interestedly looking at the seeds she had seen the light in Mendezo's eyes, had detected the fumes of alcohol. In a flash she had leaped for the door, slipped through it, slammed it in Mendezo's face, and barred it from the outside.

She was alone, and she would not trust Mendezo. Therefore she had got the rifle. She was glad the cholla-house had no windows; she was glad the door had been made strong. Mendezo would have some trouble breaking it down. She hoped he would fail, because she did n't want to shoot him.

She paid no attention to his shouts, to his profane threats. And when his voice changed and he began to whine and cajole, she grew almost light-hearted, for she knew he had found the door too strong. She would not let Mendezo out of the cholla-house, of course, for she could never trust him again.

She grew interested in observing how ineffectual were his attempts to burst the door open. At first the upper and lower edges of the door had seemed about to yield, and there had been one time when she had been able to see Mendezo's face in the aperture between door and jamb. Now the door seemed hardly to move at all. Mendezo's efforts were to be futile.

For three hours longer she sat there watching the cholla-house door. Mendezo never ceased try-

ing to tear the door down; his cursing was fearful.

She began to feel vindictive toward him; several times her brown eyes caught fire, and she meditated shooting through the door at Mendezo to close his foul mouth. But each time a merciful impulse restrained her. Mendezo lived, and continued to curse and kick at the door.

The sun climbed. Lisbeth watched the shadow at the edge of the veranda grow shorter. Finally it vanished. Noon had come. Beyond the veranda edge was a shimmering, dazzling blur of white-hot sun. It was hot on the veranda; the cholla-house must be an oven.

Well, Mendezo needed baking. Perhaps baking would banish some of his foolish notions. But the adobe walls of the cholla-house would keep out a great deal of heat.

Lisbeth got up, dipped the gourd cup into the olla that swung from the ceiling of the veranda, and drank deeply of the water strongly tainted with alkali. The water was only one of the many things in this country that she hated. Duty had brought her out here; duty was keeping her here.

She had never attempted to understand her father. Within the last three years at least. Before that he had seemed to be a perfect parent, and she felt it was the past perfection that kept her loyal to him.

Certainly since they had come to Sulphur Springs Valley he had changed remarkably.

For one thing, he had grown bitter. Lisbeth had detected a vindictive cynicism in his attitude toward others; he had lost all charity of thought. There were times when he treated even her coldly, as though he was growing tired of her. He had grown morose, taciturn. More than once she had seen flashes of cruelty in his eyes.

She had no doubt he had got that out of the atmosphere of the country. Had she not felt an impulse of cruelty just a few minutes ago, when she had thought of shooting through the door of the cholla-house at Mendezo?

Well, Mendezo was quiet now; the door had held.

Lisbeth got up again and went into the house, taking the rifle with her. A quarter of an hour later, when she emerged from the kitchen door and crossed the veranda, Mendezo was again trying to burst down the door of the cholla-house.

This time his efforts alarmed her. He had evidently secured some heavy object and was battering incessantly at the fastenings. Lisbeth saw that the slot that held the wooden bar was beginning to yield. Mendezo's curses were becoming triumphant. Lisbeth wondered if Mendezo knew she had the rifle.

She called to him, telling him that the instant he opened the door she would shoot him. The heavy crashes on the door ceased for a time. Lisbeth reasoned that Mendezo thought she was lying about having the rifle, for the crashes came again and the door shivered.

Lisbeth took careful aim with the rifle and sent a shot through the top of the door. Mendezo was short and the door high, and Lisbeth knew she did not hit the man. However, the crashes ceased, and Lisbeth smiled stiffly.

As she sank again to the chair on the veranda, chance sent her gaze westward. Some miles out in the desert she saw a dust-cloud lazily sweeping toward her. In the cloud she thought she detected a dot, but was not certain, and for a time she decided the dot existed only in her imagination and that the dust-cloud was merely a vagrant whirlwind such as she had been watching all morning.

But the cloud continued to come toward her, leisurely but steadily, and in half an hour she got up and walked to the edge of the veranda to laugh shortly with relief. A horseman rode in the dust-cloud.

She smiled mockingly at the cholla-house, whose door was again resounding with Mendezo's battering. "Wait, Philippe," she thought; "only wait!

If this rider is one of my race you will be learning something very quickly!"

She gave very little attention to the cholla-house now, glancing toward it occasionally out of the tail of her eye to note how it fared with the door. Philippe was progressing with the door, but not fast enough. The rider would reach the ranch-house before Philippe could batter the door down.

Lisbeth resumed her chair on the veranda. Formerly she had been holding the rifle so firmly that her fingers were stiff; now she relaxed and leaned back in the chair, resting the rifle on her knees and crossing her hands over it. It was just as well to keep the rifle within reach in case Philippe did succeed in demolishing the door before the rider arrived.

But the door resisted stubbornly. And the rider drew closer. He reached the far end of the horse-corral fence, skirted it, and crossed Big Sandy at a point where the stream flattened and shallowed. Then he rode over a grass level, his horse in a slow chop-trot.

He was now near enough for Lisbeth to observe that the horse was a dark roan, tall and rangy. The rider was tall and slender. He rode straight up in the saddle, like all American cowboys.

Lisbeth's hands went to her hair. As she tucked

in some stray wisps a new color surged into her cheeks, and her eyes grew soft with an odd dreaminess. Strangers came seldom to the Last Hope Ranch. "Philippe," she breathed; "I am sorry for you. The rider is a hated *Americano*. I wonder."

Strangely tumultuous were Lisbeth's thoughts as she sat looking at the rider, who had brought the roan horse to a halt at the edge of the veranda and was bowing low to her, his head just above the roan's mane, his broad hat dangling at his leather chaps.

The rider's hair was long; no barber had touched it in months. She was certain of that; as certain of it as she was certain that she had never seen such hair on a man's head. The desert dust had settled thickly on it where it came below his hatband. There it was gray, with an odd, silvery sheen. But above the hatband, under the crown where it had been protected from the dust, it was a rich chestnut which glistened in the sun like gold.

Moreover, the face below the hair was handsomely rugged. Lisbeth knew she was looking at a real man. He was bronzed to the copper hue of an Indian, and his blue eyes were pale in contrast, and slightly squinted. But they held a calm and engaging serenity, a grave, probing directness, a cold unconcern. Dominating all else was the unconcern.

A heavy revolver swung at his right hip, low, almost at his thigh. A gray flannel shirt with wide wristbands, a pocket on each side, and a high collar adorned him. A gray neckerchief sagged at his throat. High-heeled boots fitted with short-roweled spurs incased his feet. The leather chaps on his legs were black and worn through in spots.

As he sat looking at Lisbeth he restored the hat to his head and calmly beat the dust out of the leather gantlets he had removed from his hands.

"Ma'am," he said slowly, "I reckon you 're some warlike this afternoon."

Lisbeth was reminded of the rifle that rested on her knees; she had forgotten it, and her cheeks reddened as she looked at it.

"I got it for Philippe," she said. "Philippe was acting strangely. I was afraid of him."

"Philippe," he said gravely. "That sounds like the name of a man. But I have known dogs to have names pretty near like it."

"Philippe Mendezo is our Mexican gardener."

"Name of a dog," said the stranger. "I did n't miss my guess none. So Philippe has been actin' strange? What 's he been doin'?"

Lisbeth blushed; the stranger's lips tightened; his blue eyes grew hard.

"Where 's Philippe now?"

"In the cholla-house." Lisbeth pointed.

The stranger slid out of the saddle. He drew a quirt from the pommel. The whip had a short, leather-covered handle and several hard, dry rawhide thongs three feet in length knotted at the ends to keep them from fraying.

"I reckon I see," said the stranger. "Everybody gone but Philippe. Until now, Philippe has been trustworthy. When you depended upon him he fizzled. Sort of fussed you up some to find that out, eh? Well, you 've got no right to expect too much from an oiler. An' things have a way of fizzlin'."

The stranger was smiling; there was an entire absence of passion in his manner. Passion would have been excusable, and Lisbeth had expected the stranger to exhibit passion. He was cool, unconcerned. He stuck the handle of the quirt in his cartridge-belt, threw the reins over the head of the roan horse, and strode to the cholla-house.

He stopped near the door and watched it. Mendezo was again battering inside. His curses were terrific. The stranger stepped close to the door, silently withdrew the bar, and stepped back.

Mendezo's next assault upon the door threw it violently outward. Mendezo pitched outward with it. He landed face down in the dust. He got up,

raging, to see the stranger standing not more than three or four feet distant, watching him, quirt in hand.

Mendezo's right hand streaked to his side. A deft kick from the stranger's right foot, and Mendezo's knife glittered in the sunlight ten feet above his head. It fell, and Mendezo dived toward it.

A boot heel ground Mendezo's reaching hand into the dust. Screeching, he flung himself at the stranger's legs. Then the quirt descended.

Lisbeth turned her back. She cringed from the steady, vicious swishing of the quirt; she stopped her ears against Mendezo's cries. Philippe richly deserved his punishment. Lest she interfere now and spoil Philippe's lesson, she ran across the veranda and into the house, where she closed a door between her and the Mexican's screeches.

The screeches grew fainter. Horror and pity replaced Lisbeth's resentment for Philippe's actions. She opened the door and stepped out upon the veranda.

Philippe was upon his knees in front of the stranger. Philippe's shirt was cut to ribbons. At the instant Lisbeth saw the two men, Philippe was trying to clasp the stranger's legs and pleading piteously for mercy, while the stranger was backing

away from him, not striking, merely evading Mendezo's clutch.

So far as Lisbeth could determine, the stranger's manner was still passionless. She could not tell whether he enjoyed whipping Mendezo or whether the incident disgusted him. He acted as though he was merely doing his duty, and when he saw Lisbeth he shot an inquiring glance at her.

"Stop!" she ordered. "Please stop!"

"It 's up to you, ma'am," said the stranger; "I reckon he 's had pretty near enough. I was waitin' for you to give the word."

"He did n't do so—so very much, you know." Mendezo, abject, shivering, seemed to have been punished more than enough.

"Well, of course, a woman would say— I got tired myself, flogging the cuss. I think he ought to have more, though." He looked at Mendezo, and the latter wailed.

"Miss Lisbeth!" he begged. "Say no—pleese! Theeze man beat me to pieces!"

How different the light in Philippe's eyes now! The memory of how they had looked—the beast in them—in the cholla-house caused her own to blaze. She saw the stranger smiling at her, regarding her with an odd squint; he was estimating the savagery

of her, she supposed. But she did n't care. Mendezo had deserved his whipping.

"You will be whipped no more if you leave here instantly!"

Mendezo's agility was remarkable for one who had professed to have been "beaten to pieces." The stranger's voice halted Mendezo.

"Better pull your freight clear out of the country, Philippe," he said dryly. "I won't be able to stand this climate if I know you are in it."

Mendezo vanished around a corner of the chollahouse. Lisbeth glanced at the stranger. He was looking straight at her, and he was smiling.

"Do you mean that you are going to stay here—in this climate?" asked Lisbeth.

"Right here," replied the stranger.

CHAPTER II

MASQUERADING

THE stranger turned westward, to scan the trail over which he had come. Lisbeth watched him. She did not question him further, for there had been no mistaking the pointedness of his reply. "Right here," meant he intended to stay in the vicinity of the Last Hope Ranch.

Of course, he had served her, and the hospitality of the ranch was his in courtesy. He would have been asked to remain to meet her father to be thanked for what he had done. But his declaration that he intended to stay "right here" indicated that he intended to remain whether invited or not. His words had a flavor of proprietorship, of force, of quiet determination.

Lisbeth stood for an instant watching him as he stared into the desert. He seemed to have forgotten her.

He rode the roan horse to the horse-corral gates, dismounted, pulled saddle and bridle from the animal, and drove it into the inclosure. Then with

the saddle on his shoulder and the bridle caught in the crook of his elbow he strode to the stable, about a hundred yards from the cholla-house. He stood in the stable door for a few moments, watching Mendezo, who was riding a piebald pony southward.

The stranger went into the stable, came out, and stood again watching Mendezo. Then he came toward the house.

Lisbeth had retreated to the veranda. Eastward she had seen a dust-cloud. The dust-cloud this time was not a vagrant whirlwind. It was big, ballooning; she felt her father was riding ahead of it.

"Some one goin'; some one comin'."

The stranger stood at the edge of the veranda. Assurance was in his manner. As he stood looking at Lisbeth she wondered if he intended to step upon the porch without being asked. Deliberately she delayed inviting him and saw his eyes glow with amusement.

"Won't you come up?" she said then.

"One minute," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"It took you one minute to decide if you 'd ask me. I was bettin' with myself. I lose, because I 'd decided you would n't."

Lisbeth blushed. So he had correctly read her

thoughts. She *had* hesitated to ask him, though perhaps her object had not been the one he had in mind. But it was annoying to feel that he had the faculty of understanding unspoken words and thoughts.

Moreover, she had a disturbing conviction that she had really wanted him to come upon the veranda, and that he had impressed her. Against her will he had impressed her. There was something about him that challenged her interest.

His easy imperturbability disturbed her; she felt that the perpetual smile gleaming behind the calm serenity of his eyes indicated a reckless unconcern for all opposition. This man would take what he wanted, and no obstacle would deter him.

"Cool here," he said as he sank into a chair. He reached down, unbuckled the spur-straps on his boots, removed the spurs, and dropped them, clinking, to the floor at the side of the chair.

The neckerchief came off next and was carefully folded, pressed into a compact bunch, and stuck into a breast-pocket of the gray shirt.

He did not look at Lisbeth while working with the scarf, and she observed with a pulse of admiration the red bloom of health in his cheeks, beneath the bronze. Her admiration was for the man's ruggedness; the thought that he was handsome did

not enter her mind just then. She was thinking that he must be strong and that he had lived cleanly.

Yet when he looked up she was astonished at the clearness of his eyes. They had depths that compelled her gaze, and when she attempted to explore the depths in search of betraying expressions she found herself baffled. She could detect nothing but the calm serenity she had noticed with her first glance into them.

"Cool here," he repeated.

"Well—yes; so it is."

"You 're Stanton's daughter, I reckon?"

"Lisbeth Stanton. The name was manufactured from Elizabeth. I do not permit it to be shortened or lengthened. And I like it spoken sharply, as though it were standing upon its own responsibility."

"Lisbeth!" he said. "Like that? Well, I reckon it does sound as though it had individuality. I expect I come pretty near gettin' the accent on the last syllable. You 'd have raised Ned with me, I reckon."

"Well, I don't know. Are you certain you are in the habit of permitting people to 'raise Ned' with you?"

"Did n't strike you that way, eh?" He laughed, and she found the sound pleasant. In some manner

it seemed his laughter proved the serenity of his eyes. It went deep; it was convincing.

"Well, folks *do* raise Ned with me, just the same. They don't seem to care that I don't like it. But that 's nothin' to do with us right now. I 'm goin' to stay here a while, an' I 'm goin' to get acquainted. My name is Ned Templin."

Vastly astonished over his assurance, Lisbeth did not speak at once. Not until he smiled at her.

"Well," she said then, "so you have invited yourself?"

"That 's the only way I 'd ever get invited, I reckon. You see, it 's mighty simple. I 've been hearing about the Last Hope Ranch for some time. Over at Dry Lake there 's plenty of talk about the Last Hope. Folks are wondering what you an' your dad see about this place to make you want to stay in it.

"You 're Eastern, an' I 've heard your dad is wealthy and could have what he wants back there. But that ain't the point. You an' your dad stayin' here is your business. But I 've got a notion to stay here a while, too."

"How simple it sounds!" mocked Lisbeth.

"Mighty simple."

Lisbeth stared at him. He could n't be serious.

But he was serious; she could tell that by the steady gravity of his eyes.

"It seems you take much for granted," she said coldly. "You have n't asked permission to stay. In spite of what you did for me I might refuse to permit you to stay here. Father certainly will object to your presence. Father came here to be alone."

Templin laughed.

"Well, I reckon we won't quarrel. An' you can talk to your dad when he comes. He won't be long gettin' here, if that 's him." He nodded toward the desert, where the dust-cloud traveled. I 'm in a mite of a hurry to get these duds off an' sort of change my appearance. Over at Dry Lake I heard talk about the clothes your dad brought out here. I 'd be obliged if you 'd tell me where I can find them."

"Oh!" she said; "I suppose you are going to steal them!"

"You 're talkin' through your hat, ma'am, an' you know better!" he answered shortly. "I 'm goin' to wear one of your dad's suits for a while, to sort of change my style. You see, I 'm sort of expectin' company."

Lisbeth paled, stared westward into the desert. Templin had come from the west. He observed her pallor and laughed lowly.

"Yes," he drawled; "it 's likely my company will come from that direction. There 'll be a dozen or more. I figure I 'm one day ahead of them; or I ought to be, dependin' on how hard they 're ridin'. We 'll say they 've been ridin' hard, an' that would cut down my lead considerable. They might reduce it to hours instead of one day."

"You mean that you are pursued?"

"Somethin' like that, ma'am. A posse. Mebbe the sheriff. I did n't have time to make sure."

"Then you—you are—" She paused, stood erect, stared at him. Her eyes were wide with dismay and apprehension.

"Well, I reckon I 'm that—a fugitive," said Templin, slowly.

"And you have done something; you have committed a crime?"

"They 've laid a lot of them to me—robbery an' murder."

Lisbeth shuddered. Mendezo's company would be preferable to this man's presence. Yet somehow she was glad he had come. He did not look like a murderer, and yet, looking into his eyes now, she saw how easily one might believe him to be what his words indicated.

What terrible passions might lurk behind the cold serenity of his eyes? Even now he might be

concealing passion equally as dangerous to her as that which Mendezo had exhibited. Lisbeth only half accepted the suspicion that he might have designs on her, however. Somehow it seemed ridiculous to suspect him. His eyes were too calm to conceal that sort of passion; his manner was too easy and natural, and the humor glinting in his glance was too gentle.

He was an enigma, and the quiet force of him was not to be denied. But he was not like Mendezo. Mendezo's instincts were bestial; this man was to be trusted, even though she could detect a nonchalant recklessness in him. She wondered if the recklessness in him was what made him so magnetic?

Certainly some force which she could not define was working on her. This man had come out of the desert, had served her, and had calmly told her he had decided to stay at the ranch-house. He had received no invitation; he must know he was not welcome. He was a fugitive; using his own words, robbery and murder had been "laid" to him.

"Your dad has lots of clothes," his voice interrupted her thoughts; "I 've heard about them over in Wilcox. I 'm wantin' you to introduce me to some of them. A whole outfit."

"Father has a wardrobe in his room," gasped Lisbeth. "You 'll find what you want in there."

"All right; come along?" He moved toward the door.

Lisbeth's face flamed, paled. Her eyes flashed with indignation.

"I beg your pardon!" she said stiffly.

Templin squinted humorously at her.

"Don't go to gettin' thoughts, ma'am. I reckon I can change my clothes without any help. The trouble with women is that they 're always anticipatin' trouble. You 're goin' to have no trouble with me. Not any kind of trouble. That is, as long as you do what I 'm tellin' you to do." His lips twitched with an ironic smile as he watched her, his hand on the knob of the screen door.

"Where 's your dad's room?"

"Up-stairs. To your left at the end of the hall."

"All right," he said shortly. "Come a-runnin'!"

He opened the screen door, stepped inside, and held the door ajar for her. Lisbeth looked at him, at the door; turned her head and gazed at the dust-cloud on the desert. The cloud looked near, and yet if the rider in it should be her father he could not reach the ranch-house for more than an hour. Distances out here were deceiving.

Lisbeth glanced around, hoping to see the rifle she had held when the stranger arrived. She remembered that as she had fled into the house to

escape witnessing the thrashing administered to Philippe by the stranger she had laid the weapon on the kitchen table.

"Well," said Templin, still holding the screen door open; "you want the house to get full of flies? Seven, by actual count."

"Seven what?"

"Seven flies. That many have gone in. More are comin'. Curious about flies—always buttin' in."

How ghastly the triviality seemed! Lisbeth hated Templin now. She wondered how she had ever thought him forceful and impressing. Yet she found she was moving toward the door, though there was the whole wide outdoors in which to escape him. There were horses in the corral, saddles in the stable; she had legs, and she might have used them to run from him. Instead, she was moving toward him, obeying him.

She halted at the door, stiffened, and stood rigid, pale and defiant, her eyes flashing.

"You will go alone!" she declared. "I shall not help you to steal father's clothes. And I warn you that you had better hurry. If father catches you here he will thrash you as badly as you thrashed Mendezo."

"I 've heard your dad is a wolf. Over at Wilcox

they say he 's a mighty mean man an' right handy with a gun. But that 's what I 've got to expect. It ain't worrin' me any. I ain't any slouch with a gun myself. You comin' in, or are you goin' to stand there till your dad comes an' have me down him when he hits the porch?

"There ain't any foolin' about this, ma'am," he added as she gave him a startled glance. "I 've decided to do what I 've told you, an' I 'm goin' to do it. You 've got an idea that I 'm meanin' harm to you. You 're hittin' the wrong trail. I 'm after just what I told you I was after. That 's all there is to it. But if you go to raisin' a fuss an' yellin' an' your dad hears you an' goes to interferin', I 'll have to drill him."

"Do you mean to say you would kill my father?"

"I reckon I would, ma'am. My plans are goin' through."

Lisbeth stepped past the screen door and stood beside Templin. She saw his eyes glow with admiration for her courage.

She pointed through a doorway toward the stairs.

"That way," she directed. She saw her rifle on the table, where she had left it, and her eyes flashed.

He caught the expression, walked to the table, took up the rifle, ejected the cartridges, laid the weapon down again.

"Just to avoid accident," he said. "Guns have a way of goin' off if they 're loaded. I don't want you to be any murderer; it ain't a satisfyin' feelin'."

"You ought to know!" she retorted.

"I reckon you 'd better go first," he directed. "It ain't accordin' to the best manners, but it 's a heap safer." He stepped aside as she walked through the door and followed her closely up the stairs. She halted on the upper landing and pointed toward a closed door.

"That is father's room," she informed Templin.

"Right. You go ahead."

Her heart pounding with apprehension, Lisbeth opened the door of the room. She walked to the far side of it, where she stood breathing fast, dreadingly watching Templin.

He glanced at her, smiled, swiftly examined the room.

"In there?" he asked, pointing toward a big black walnut wardrobe.

Lisbeth nodded; watched him as he opened the door of the cabinet and began to select articles of wearing-apparel. He drew out several suits of clothes; seemed to hesitate between a gray and a light, rather flashy herring-bone. He decided upon the latter, took it out, and laid it upon the bed. Lisbeth had turned her back and was looking out of a

window. Templin stepped to her side and saw that she was watching the approaching dust-cloud.

"Ten miles," he informed her. "It 's mighty hot to-day, an' if your dad has been to Lazette he 's been ridin' since mornin'. He 'll be more than an hour gettin' here."

Lisbeth knew Templin spoke the truth. Her father knew nothing of her plight and would take his time riding the ten miles. Her father always took his time. He was slow, deliberate, cool. Nothing disturbed him. She had never yet observed him exhibit passion.

If he were to enter the house at this minute, to discover Templin's presence, even to understand her predicament, he would betray no perturbation. He was more like Templin than any man she ever saw.

"Looks mighty like a fit," Templin said. He opened drawers, peered into them, tossed out a shirt, collar, tie. He found shoes in a closet—low shoes, neatly polished, with wide laces in them. On a shelf he discovered several hats. He selected a gray felt with a narrow brim.

Glancing at the various articles of apparel, Lisbeth was astonished to find that he had a surprising instinct for harmony, sartorial judgment that quite equaled her father's, who had always been very particular about his appearance.

"Well?" inquired Lisbeth, when she saw that there was nothing more to select. She was wondering if he meant to keep her in the room while he changed.

"I reckon that 's all," he said. But now he pulled a shaving-outfit from a drawer, laid it on the top of the dresser, and searched another drawer. He brought out slender shears and a comb, which he held in his hands when he turned to Lisbeth.

"This is first," he said. "I ain't been around a barber for six months. I 've shaved, after a fashion. When a sheriff is hot on a man 's trail he ain't got much time to dillydally. I don't reckon I 'm barber enough to cut my own hair, so I 'll have to ask some one to do it for me."

"You certainly don't mean to say that you expect me to cut your hair?" Lisbeth's lips were curving scornfully.

"There don't seem to be anybody else around." He gazed about as though seeking another person. "No," he said, "there ain't anybody else here. We 're still alone. I reckon it 'll have to be you ma'am."

"How absurd!"

Lisbeth's voice was witheringly scornful. Templin shot a probing glance at her. There were little flecks of light in his eyes. He took a scarf

from a stand and wound it around his neck. Then, the shears and comb in one hand, a chair in the other, he walked into the hall and paused before the door of the bath-room. There he looked back at Lisbeth, who still stood at the window in the other room.

"All ready, ma'am!" he said sharply.

Lisbeth did not answer.

"Don't tell me that you 're goin' back on me now, ma'am," he said. "I sure can't beautify myself without gettin' my hair cut."

"Of course, I shan't cut your hair!" declared Lisbeth. "The idea is preposterous!"

"But a heap necessary," insisted Templin. "An' I ain't got time to argue about it!"

His voice was suddenly sharp and commanding; a complete change had come over him. The amused glint had gone from his eyes; they now had a steely look that chilled her. He seemed to exude the force that she had detected in him; there was about him now an atmosphere of strange inflexibility. She saw that his lips were in straight lines and that his chin had a queer thrust.

"You 're goin' to cut my hair, ma'am," he added. "An' you 're goin' to do it without any foolin' or delayin'. I don't expect you 'll be able to cut it accordin' to Hoyle an' Manning, or any of the other

authorities; but if you 're careful you 'll be able to make a presentable job of it. Anyway, you 've got to do it. Come a-runnin'!"

"I absolutely refuse!"

Lisbeth's voice was so scathingly scornful that she was certain he would not insist. That was one thing no man could compel her to do!

But what was he doing? Did he mean to shoot her for refusing? She felt a cold paralysis stealing over her; her knees were knocking together.

Templin had drawn out the heavy revolver and was slowly twirling the cylinder. The look in his eyes was positively bloodthirsty, and his lips were curved into a crooked, wanton smile.

"Why—why," she faltered, "you certainly don't mean to shoot me?"

"Not you, ma'am. But you don't seem to understand that I 'm in earnest. This hair-cuttin' job has got to be done *pronto*. There ain't no two ways about that. If you don't do it, you 're goin' to inconvenience me a whole lot. Referrin' to that posse I told you about. Well, if you inconvenience me, I 'm comin' right back at you. I get that hair-cut, or you 're out a dad. That 's a heap positive!"

"You 'll kill him?"

"You 're a right good guesser."

Lisbeth stared at him. He was in earnest; he

would carry out his threat. She stood for an instant irresolute, wavering. Templin waited silently, seeming to divine the conflict that was going on in her breast. When he saw a wave of color surge into her face the hard expression of his own softened a little, and the old glint of amusement came back into his eyes.

And yet, somehow, noticing these things, Lisbeth still felt the threat he had voiced. He certainly would kill her father if she persisted in refusing.

She took a step toward him, silently nodding her surrender, and he turned his back and walked into the bath-room.

When she reached the door she saw him standing before a mirror smiling at his reflection.

"I sure do look a heap frayed around the edges," he said. The menace of his manner had disappeared; he spoke to her as he might have spoken to his barber.

She went close to him, unspeakably embarrassed but quietly determined. Without seeming to notice that she was standing so near, he handed her a small pair of clippers.

"Found 'em on the shelf here," he informed her. "I reckon they 've been used, too. Your dad cut his own hair?"

"I 've cut it for him a number of times. That is,

I 've cut it when he did n't find it convenient to go to town to have a barber do it for him."

"Then you ain't any green hand," he said with a slow grin at her. "I was a little afraid of that. I don't want my beauty spoiled. A good hair-cut makes a man feel well dressed."

The sensation that swept over her as she touched the back of his neck with the clippers defied analysis. It was like an electric shock.

She was at a loss to understand the feeling. She knew she hated Templin, yet the thrill that went through her was not hate. It was the first time she had ever touched any man except her father, and touching her father had not affected her as she was affected at this moment. Glancing sidewise into the mirror, she saw that her face was aflame.

The same glance showed her Templin's face in profile. His expression was serious, and she observed that he had a really good profile.

But at the first touch of the clippers she became absorbed in the task. Templin had an enormous lot of hair. Below the silver sheen of the desert dust that had settled thickly upon it shone the rich chestnut of its natural color, and she soon had tufts of it lying on the floor of the bath-room.

She grew more composed as the work progressed, and began to take some interest in the task. She

found that his hair was not difficult to cut, for his head was well shaped, and all she had to do was to follow its outline. She discovered that his hair had a reddish brown tinge, that there were threads of gold in it.

There was one time when she held the clippers suspended, almost yielding to an impulse to run her fingers through it. She did that later, when she began using the comb and shears, and she must have lingered a little too long at the work, for Templin said shortly:

"Shake a leg, ma'am!"

After that, although she did not answer him, she worked furiously, her face stained crimson. When he seated himself on the edge of the bath-tub so that she could get at the top of his head she felt an overpowering impulse to box his ears, but compromised by jerking his head savagely this way and that.

"Unpardonable violence, ma'am," was his only protest.

Later he calmly opened the razor, stropped it, and gave it to her handle foremost. "Here 's your chance, ma'am," he said. "It 's as sure as the rifle you was eyeing so longingly down-stairs."

"If I were you I presume I would use the razor as you suggest," she flashed back at him.

"Well," he said with provoking quietness, "I sure

wish you would use it to get this job over with. Your dad is gettin' closer all the time."

Twice the edge of the razor nicked the skin of his neck. He cringed a little at the smart of the cuts, and Lisbeth's expression became vindictive. But when the work was finished and she laid the razor on the shelf she did not look at Templin, although she knew he was watching her.

"Ma'am," he said, "you 're a gritty girl an' a mighty good barber. I 've knowed men that could n't do as good a job as you 've done."

"You 'll never know how near I came to cutting you," she said.

"Shucks! So you had notions? Well, you did n't use 'em. I was n't worryin' none. But I reckon the job 's over, an' gabbin' ain't goin' to help none. Barbers are always wantin' to palaver. You go down-stairs now an' wait for your dad. I 'll be down when I get into the new togs. If he comes before I get down, tell him to wait."

Thus dismissed, Lisbeth gratefully withdrew. Down on the veranda she stood, wondering over the man's effrontery, his calm assumption of authority.

More, she wondered why she had obeyed him, why she had acted as his barber. It seemed, now that she was on the veranda again and Templin out

of her sight, that there had been little danger of his carrying out his threat to shoot her father.

He had said that merely to frighten her, of course, and she had been weak enough to submit. Well, her father was coming; he was very close to the ranch-house, and he would punish Templin when he heard what had happened.

But when she saw her father dismounting from his horse at the stable she grew curiously calm. Whatever danger had threatened her was now over. She was safe.

She felt that she did not care to provoke a personal clash between her father and Templin, a clash that might result in the death of one of them. She knew her father had a vicious temper, that he was cool and resourceful in a crisis; and she had no doubt that Templin knew how to use a gun.

While Stanton was putting his horse away she entered the kitchen, picked up the cartridges Templin had ejected from the rifle, reloaded the weapon, and hung it from its pegs on the kitchen wall. When she returned to the veranda she greeted her father quietly, as usual.

"Stayed in Lazette longer than I expected, Lisbeth," said Stanton. "Business."

He stepped upon the veranda, dropped into a

chair, and gratefully drank the water Lisbeth dipped from the olla and silently gave him.

"Hot to-day," he remarked as Lisbeth seated herself. "You look cool, though—mighty cool. How have you been employing your time?"

Lisbeth had decided to tell her story with some reservations. She did n't want trouble; there had been enough. Two strong men like her father and Templin must not be permitted to fight. The death of one or the other would be certain.

Perhaps Templin did not mean to stay long. If she kept silent regarding his action in forcing her to cut his hair, and said nothing concerning his threats to kill her father, he might presently go away and the incident would be closed.

Stanton repeated his question. He had caught his chin in his right hand and was leaning back in his chair reflectively watching the girl. Stanton's eyes were as steady as Templin's. They had not the calm serenity of the desert rider's; but they, too, held depths that the girl could not fathom. They were cynical eyes, cold, disbelieving, probing.

Stanton was about Templin's size. Both were big men, muscular, slender. Templin's shoulders were broader, his arms a trifle longer. And Templin was in the better physical condition. Of course, Templin was younger, possibly twenty years

younger. He was a desert man, while her father had been reared in the East.

Mentally brushing away the twenty years, Lisbeth could see her father at Templin's age. On that basis of comparison, there was a startling similarity between them.

"I 've spent most of the day enjoying Philippe's antics!" said Lisbeth, answering Stanton's question.

"Rather a difficult matter, was n't it? Philippe is n't very good company. However, he is trustworthy."

"Was trustworthy," said Lisbeth significantly.

Stanton straightened. His eyes flashed; two spots of red stained his cheeks faintly.

"You mean that Philippe betrayed his trust?" He saw the answer in the girl's eyes, and got to his feet, his right hand hovering close to the revolver swinging at his right hip.

"Where is Philippe?" he asked slowly.

"Philippe went away several hours ago. He spent the morning in the cholla-house, trying to break the door down. I sat here on the veranda with my rifle. I rather hoped he would succeed. I wanted an excuse to shoot him. I did shoot through the door at him once."

She told him of Philippe's actions. Stanton's

face whitened. Then she mentioned the stranger, and a great relief shone in her father's face.

"Flogged him with a quirt, did he?" he said at the conclusion of her story. "Lisbeth, why did n't you keep that man here so that I could thank him?"

"He is here."

"Where?"

"I think he is up-stairs. I think he is shaving and changing his clothes."

Stanton had been about to rise from the chair; he now sank back into it and watched Lisbeth keenly.

"Well, that 's rather all right, I presume. But you told me he is a cowboy. I never knew a cowboy carrying a change of clothing around with him."

"I believe I said nothing about that, father. It is my impression that he intends using one of your suits."

Stanton smiled. There was ironic mirth in the expression.

"You told him he might use my clothes?"

"I offered him the freedom of the house because of what he did for me."

"Quite right. That 's the old-fashioned brand of hospitality."

Stanton seemed to be satisfied; still he watched Lisbeth attentively.

"I suppose he mentioned his name?"

"Yes," replied Lisbeth. "His name is Templin."

Every muscle of Stanton's body seemed to leap. He sat rigid in the chair for an instant staring at Lisbeth.

Then he got up, walked the length of the veranda, returned to the chair, and dropped into it. He seemed to have conquered some great emotion, for when he again looked at Lisbeth there was a smile of cold amusement on his lips.

"Lisbeth," he said, "did this man mention his first name?"

"Yes; he called himself Ned—Ned Templin."

Again Stanton's muscles seemed to tighten. And then he sat very still in the chair, staring out into the desert. Presently, observing that Lisbeth was watching him, he smiled.

"Lisbeth," he said, "do you know that you have been entertaining a celebrity?"

"I think Mr. Templin did mention that he expected some men to call upon him very soon. A sheriff's posse, I think he said. But I did n't know he said anything about his being a celebrity."

"He did n't mention that, eh? Sort of a modest chap, is n't he?" Stanton laughed mirthlessly. He got up, brushed a hand over the butt of the gun at his hip.

"I think I 'll have to take a look at our visitor, Lisbeth," he said. "I 've heard about Ned Templin, but I 've never seen him."

Lisbeth rose also.

"No violence, dad," she pleaded. "Remember, he did me a great favor."

"Ordinarily, people don't seek violence with Ned Templin," said Stanton. "It is n't supposed to be safe. Have no fear of my taking chances with Mr. Templin."

Stanton crossed the veranda and entered the house through the kitchen door, while Lisbeth, attempting to quell a strange tumult in her breast by holding her hands pressed tightly over her bosom, stood beside the screen door, listening.

Stanton silently mounted the stairs. The instant he turned his back to Lisbeth his expression changed. His eyes became cold, cruel, mocking.

His manner of ascending the stairs was that of the hunter stalking his prey. He wore soft boots. These he removed before he reached the bottom of the stairs. He went up noiselessly, sideways, flattening himself against the wall, watching the top of the stairs with alert glances.

When he reached the upper landing he paused. It was some time before he ventured to peer around the corner of the wall at the landing, and when he

did so it was merely to take one flashing glance toward his room.

He drew back again. He had not seen Templin, but he had caught a glimpse of a shadow that reached over the threshold of the doorway of his room, and he knew Templin was inside.

Slowly, cautiously, he made his way along the hall until he reached the door of his room. There he again paused and peered around the door-jamb.

His strange guest was standing before the dresser adjusting a necktie—one of Stanton's. Apparently the tie did not suit, for Templin removed it, together with the collar, and substituted another.

Stanton drew the revolver from the holster at his hip. But he made no effort to interrupt his guest.

The masquerader got the tie on and, still standing before the glass in the dresser, put on the herring-bone coat, wriggled until the collar of the garment settled into place around his neck, shot the cuffs of the shirt he had put on so that they showed a white margin below the sleeves of the coat, and reached for the narrow-brimmed soft felt hat he had selected in Lisbeth's presence.

Adjusting the hat, both hands gripping its brim, he felt the steel muzzle of Stanton's gun against his back just above the hips.

Templin did not turn. He did not start. He

gave no indication that he knew Stanton's gun was pressing against him. He got the hat on his head in a position that seemed to suit him, gazed at it in the glass, and then deliberately folded his arms across his chest.

Without turning, he spoke:

"I told your daughter to ask you to wait for me down-stairs, Stanton," he said. "Seems she sort of forgot to mention it to you."

"No funny business, Templin. You are n't half as clever as you think you are. What are you doing at the Last Hope?"

"Nothin', now, I reckon, Stanton. I 'm just standin' here admirin' my beauty."

Stanton drew back a little; seated himself in a chair. The pistol in his hand still menaced Templin. Templin saw Stanton retreating from him, but he did not change his position until commanded to do so by the other.

"Turn around, Templin."

"Thanks."

Templin turned, looked intently at Stanton. The other returned the stare. The gaze held for a long time, both men maintaining silence. A flicker of admiration crossed Stanton's eyes; Templin's lips curved with a barely perceptible reluctant grin.

"So you 're Stanton," he said. "Hearin' so much about you I was expectin' to see a sort of a fat guy which was fed up on Eastern delicacies until his stummick had gone back on him. If you had a sort of pasty face an' bulgin' eyes that had come from grubbin' too much at Sherry's or Delmonico's you 'd about meet my idea of an Eastern guy come out here to croak with his boots on. But you don't shape up to them ideas. I reckon you ain't done any stuffin' in your time."

"You don't vindicate my previous opinion of the outlaw, Ned Templin," slowly said Stanton. "Not a little bit. I was looking for a wild and woolly specimen with a bad eye and a swagger.

"I see a fashion-plate dude. The dude is burned to a nice bronze and has execrable manners; but he talks familiarly of Sherry's and Delmonico's, places which, by the way, I know; and he has nerve enough not to flinch when he feels a gun against his spine. Aside from that I really know nothing about you, Templin. That 's why I 'm here. A man ought to know something of his guest. What brought you to the Last Hope?"

"The sheriff has been crowdin' me pretty close, Stanton. I started south. Trails was all guarded. The same goes for the north. West folks know me

too well. East was left, so I headed this way. I figure I 'm about ten or twelve hours ahead of the posse."

"What 's the charge?"

"Murder."

"Are you guilty?"

"Well, that 's a question. It 's bad manners to deny the law's veracity."

"That 's your business, anyway, Templin. I had no right to ask that question. But I believe I have a right to ask this one. Why are you wearing my clothes?"

"Got tired of runnin', Stanton."

"Oh, that 's it, eh? Well, there does n't seeem to to be anything else to do. You can't stop here, of course."

"That 's what I 'm figurin' on doin', Stanton."

Stanton laughed. "That 's preposterous, Templin. You can't stop here."

"I 've done my talkin', Stanton."

Stanton reflected. At last he spoke.

"You say you have about ten hours start of the sheriff's posse. A man of your ability ought to increase that without any trouble. There was no need of your stopping here in the first place."

"Horse sprained a knee."

"There were a dozen of my horses in the corral."

"I ain't a horse-thief, Stanton."

"You might have borrowed one from my daughter."

"She was in trouble when I got here. You 'd left her alone with that damned oiler. You ought to have had better sense."

Stanton ignored the rebuke. "You may have a horse right now," he offered.

"Too late," smiled Templin. "I 've wasted a lot of time here. My ten hours was all in my head. The sheriff an' his posse will be here in ten minutes."

Stanton started. "How do you know that?" he questioned.

Templin stared out of a window. Stanton followed his gaze. Westward, at a distance of perhaps two miles, came a huge dust-cloud. It was traveling fast and was dotted with the shapes of men and horses.

"You 're right, Templin," said Stanton. "They 've got you!"

Templin yawned. "I reckon they ain't got me, Stanton. I 've had a hair-cut—a peacherino. I 've shaved. I 've slipped on your dude clothes. There ain't a man in that crowd would take me for Ned Templin."

Stanton surveyed him critically. "Well," he said, "I never saw you except as you are dressed

right now. Undoubtedly the duds change your appearance. But whether they change it enough to fool the sheriff is another question.

"Certainly one thing won't fool him. That 's your ungrammatical speech. Very possibly you 'd be all right if you would n't talk. But the first word you utter the sheriff will know you and the dude clothing do not go together."

He smiled into Templin's eyes. "I came up here thinking I 'd have to shoot you, Templin. I thought I 'd find a different sort of man. I don't quite fathom you; but you served my daughter well. For that you have my good wishes.

"If you can get away with what you 've started I promise not to interfere. Tell the sheriff anything you like, and I 'll back you up."

"I 'll remember you in my will, Stanton," grinned Templin. He glanced around the room, picked up his discarded clothing, and stuck it into the wardrobe behind some boxes. His cartridge-belt went with the clothing, but the heavy six-shooter he drew from its holster and deftly stuck into the right hip-pocket of the herring-bone trousers.

Stanton watched him with inexpressive eyes, and a moment later followed him down the hall when Templin announced that he had "better go down an' get set before the posse gets here."

When Templin opened the screen door and stepped out upon the veranda, Lisbeth stared at him in amazement. A rather wild and uncouth-looking Templin had followed her up-stairs an hour or so before. The natty-looking man who now stood before her bore little resemblance to the Templin she had waited upon.

The transformation was astounding. Templin looked like an Easterner not more than a few hours in the country. There was not the slightest trace of awkwardness in his manner; he even seemed to give grace to his new clothing.

His narrow-brimmed felt hat dangled from his left hand, he touched the finger-tips of the right to his chest as he made a courtly bow toward Lisbeth without looking at her. His gaze was on the riders, who were closer and coming rapidly.

"Just a dozen, Miss Stanton," he said, his gaze now holding the girl's. "My judgment is vindicated. Ned Templin is an important personage; in fact I may say he is much sought after. Unfortunately, Ned Templin is n't here any more. He rode away on a borrowed horse some hours ago. Can you remember that, if Bob Norton, the sheriff, asks about Templin?

"Also, can you remember that my new name is Lanning—Lawrence Lanning—which you may

shorten to Larry in order to make the deception convincing? I 'm from the East, of course; say from Boston, if you like. I have been at the Last Hope for two weeks."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lisbeth. "You wish me to lie!"

She glanced quickly at Stanton, observed his slow, ironical, acquiescent nod, and caught her breath sharply.

"I am not in the habit of telling lies," she said, defiantly.

"You will lie now, though," was Templin's calm reply.

"What makes you think I shall?"

"Because telling the truth will result in great unpleasantness. To all of us," he added significantly.

Again Lisbeth glanced at her father. On the latter's lips was still the ironical smile. It seemed to convey Stanton's unconcern.

Lisbeth might lie if she wished, or she might tell the truth. The matter was entirely in her hands. Stanton would be an amused onlooker.

"I think I shall tell those men the truth!" she declared. "If I am asked I certainly shall!" she added, with a vindictive look at Templin.

Templin smiled, bowed, and dropped carelessly into a chair.

The sheriff and his posse came on rapidly. They crossed Big Sandy, swept over the level near the horse-corral, and brought their horses to a halt within a dozen yards of the veranda.

The posse had evidently been riding hard. Horses and men were dust-covered, perspiring. The other riders sat stiffly in their saddles while the sheriff slid down and strode a wavering course toward the veranda.

The sheriff wore two heavy guns. Lisbeth observed that his finger-tips hovered close to his holsters as he stopped close to the veranda and scrutinized the three persons who occupied it.

"H-m," he said shortly, jerkily. "Takin' it easy, eh? Pretty hot ridin'." The sheriff's eyes were bright, eagle-like. They held a light of high intensity and shot searching glances here and there. His voice was dry, expressionless.

"Yes—pretty hot," agreed Stanton. "You 're Bob Norton, are n't you? Certainly!" Stanton got up. "Glad to see you, sheriff! Tell your men to get down, water their horses, and get some refreshment. It is n't often we are honored in this manner."

"Stanton, we sure appreciate that," said the sheriff. "Mebbe we 're takin' you up an' mebbe we ain't. Depends on what you know. Has a rider

passed hyar within the last day or two? A guy named Ned Templin?"

"I 've been two days in Lazette, Norton. I have been home not more than half an hour. No rider passed me."

"Straight enough, I reckon," snapped the sheriff. "But there 's loopholes. Did you see Ned Templin?"

"I would n't know Templin if I saw him, sheriff. I saw no rider of any description."

"I reckon that lets you out." He stared intently at Lisbeth. "You stayed to home, I reckon. Wa'al, I' m askin' you. Hev you seen Ned Templin?'

"I do not know the gentleman you name."

"H-m," mused Norton, his bright eyes roving from one to the other. "Templin don't seem to be none acquainted in this section. We 'll change that question a little. Hev you see a rider pass hyar?"

"No," answered Lisbeth firmly. She had spoken the truth; no rider had passed.

Norton rubbed his chin. "Thar ain't no one hidin' in the house?"

"I think not, Norton. But you are at liberty to look, if you care to."

It was Stanton who answered. He met Norton's gaze steadily.

"I ain't doubtin' you, Stanton, not none at all. But we ain't overlookin' nothin'." He turned his back to the three on the veranda and called shortly to his men:

"Spill off thar an' take a look around the buildin's. Templin may have snuck in somewhars!"

Without waiting an invitation, he stepped upon the veranda, drank deeply from the olla, and then sank heavily into a chair to stare at his men, who were scattering to search various outbuildings. Two did not dismount, but rode around the horse-corral.

While the search went on, Lisbeth once felt her father's gaze upon her, and she divined he must be thinking what she was thinking at that moment—that there would be excitement if the men of the posse discovered Templin's horse, which was in the corral. Lisbeth had not lied so far; she had merely evaded giving direct answers.

She wondered if she would lie for Templin if she found it necessary to lie to save him. She decided she would n't. She resented having been forced to become his barber; she resented his threatening her

father in order to compel her to yield to his orders. She resented his assumption of authority over her, his presumption, his cool insolence, his present indifference to danger.

He sat there calmly watching the sheriff and the men of the posse. He was as unperturbed as though he were merely an onlooker, the onlooker he appeared to be. He was a cheat, a liar, a sleek deceiver, a murderer.

He was an enigma that defied solution; he was a contradictory force of multiform character, acting each part with a completeness and finesse that startled her. He had not been more convincing as the outlaw Ned Templin than he appeared as the newly arrived Easterner, Lawrence Lanning. Lisbeth had not recovered from her amazement over the startling change in his speech, the grace of his manner when he had appeared upon the veranda with her father, the cool assurance with which he had told her that she would lie to save him.

Watching him, thinking deeply, Lisbeth became aware that Templin was smiling at her. She blushed, flashed a look of defiance at him. At the instant there came a shout from the corral.

"Hyar 's Templin's hoss!" yelled one of the posse.

"Ha!"

This was the sheriff. He was on his feet, facing Stanton, Lisbeth and Templin. His eyes were ablaze with suspicion; his hands were lingering close to the butt of the guns at his hips.

"Templin's horse, eh!" he said. "Wa-al, you folks set tight. Don't go to makin' any unnecessary moves. Thar 's somethin' mighty queer about this hyar deal, and I 'm goin' to the bottom of it!"

CHAPTER III

A DUAL IDENTITY

ALTHOUGH Lisbeth had expected the sheriff's men to discover Templin's horse, she could not resist looking at Templin, even while she was aware that a glance at him might direct suspicion to him. She caught her breath in amazement when she saw that the discovery of the horse seemed to have no effect upon Templin's composure.

So far as Lisbeth could see, Templin had not changed position. Indeed, he seemed actually to have relaxed. Not a muscle of his body seemed to have tensed; he sat well back in the chair, one hand gently caressing his chin, his gaze directed at the sheriff with languid interest. But Lisbeth observed that his eyes held a strange flicker and that the faint smile that curved his lips seemed to express cold mockery.

For an instant, following the sheriff's threat, there was silence. Lisbeth felt she must say something, must do something, to break the tension. Stanton, apparently, did not mean to interfere. He

sat in his chair nonchalantly smoking, calmly watching Norton. Lisbeth saw that he, too, was smiling as though cynically amused.

Sheriff Norton's eyes were aflame with exultation. It was evident he was convinced that the fugitive was concealed somewhere around the Last Hope and that his capture was certain. Norton was the alert officer of the law, intent upon doing his duty.

He kept backing away from the veranda, his hands sweeping the butts of his guns as though he anticipated violent action from one of the three seated in front of him. Meanwhile, several members of the posse were leading the captured horse out of the corral. Lisbeth observed that the animal limped slightly.

Norton halted after he had backed to a point several yards distant from the veranda.

"Stanton," he said, "thar 's an explanation due! You said you did n't see Templin. What you got to say about his horse bein' in your corral?"

"That 's a strange horse, all right, Norton. I assure you I do not know how he got into my corral."

"Wa-al, mebbe you did n't know it, Stanton, you sayin' you just got home. But I reckon your gal, bein' hyar, ought to know somethin' about thet horse. What you got to say, ma'am? Speak up; no one 's goin' to hurt you!"

"I have n't been paying any attention to the horses."

"Wa-al thet 's all right, ma'am; but thet ain't answerin' my question. Did you know thet horse was in the corral?"

"I tell you I did not pay any particular attention to the horses. Perhaps I looked toward them a dozen times. I do not remember to have noticed that one."

"The point is: did you notice him at all? Did you know he was thar?"

It was plain the sheriff meant to insist upon a direct answer. Lisbeth began to show signs of distress. Her cheeks reddened, and though she stared defiantly at the officer the latter seemed to scent victory.

"Ma'am," he said, a note of excitement in his voice, "you knowed thet horse was thar! You seen his rider. You 're goin' to tell—"

"Sheriff," drawled Templin, "it seems to me that you are deliberately persecuting Miss Stanton. Miss Stanton knows nothing about that horse. She was in the house when the animal was placed in the corral."

"Ha!"

Norton's gaze had shifted quickly to Templin. His bright eyes were wide with a new interest, his

gaze roved over Templin with searching, probing intentness. At last, having finished his critical examination, he smiled crookedly.

But there was no recognition in his eyes. Lisbeth, holding her breath, divined that the sheriff did not know the graceful, well-dressed stranger as Templin.

Stanton, glancing from the sheriff to Templin, smiled ironically.

"Meanin' you did see him put thar!" snapped Norton. "Wa-al, get goin'! When was he put in thar, an' who put him thar?"

"The horse was placed in the corral early this morning by a man who seemed to be in a hurry."

"What time this mornin'?"

"Shortly after daylight. I had got up early, for I rather enjoy the morning air out here. I saw a rider coming from the west. He rode directly to the corral, entered, and caught a horse. He exchanged saddles and rode away."

"What kind of a horse did he take out of the corral?"

"It seemed to be a sort of spotted animal, sheriff."

"The piebald horse—Patches," said Stanton. "Sheriff, it seems Mr. Lanning is right; Patches is n't in the corral."

"It took you a hell of a long time to get on to thet,

Stanton," sarcastically said Norton. "If you don't pay any more attention to your stock than thet it ain't no wonder you don't get along."

"Norton, I am not asking your assistance to run this ranch," declared Stanton.

"Stanton, I reckon I apologize. But findin' out thet this hyar Eastern dude saw Templin ride in, an' did n't have sense enough to open his trap until now, has sort of fussed me up some. When this country gets full of specimens like this hyar dude things will go to hell mighty quick!"

He faced Templin, his voice leaping with anger.

"Why in hell did n't ycu shoot off your trap when I first begun askin' questions? Did n't you have sense enough to know thet I wanted to know?"

Templin did not answer, though he looked straight at the sheriff, and Lisbeth saw his eyes grow cold and steely. She saw the sheriff thrust his chin out and return Templin's gaze, to hold it for several seconds as he seemed to test the mentality and the mettle of the man he had termed "Eastern dude."

Lisbeth saw a shade of doubt pass over the sheriff's eyes, a shadow, as though indecision had assailed him; she saw him draw a deep breath, and for an instant she had a fear that he had at last recognized Templin. But an instant later she knew

that into Norton's consciousness was being driven the conviction that the man to whom he had so contemptuously referred would be a worthy antagonist in any kind of a battle, mental or physical, that he was not to be intimidated or insulted with impunity.

Norton broke the silence with a short, respectful:

"I reckon I was travelin' too fast, Lanning. Findin' thet Templin got away sort of flabbergasted me. You don't mind sayin' which way Templin rode?"

"South," replied Templin. "He was traveling fast."

The sheriff made a gesture of resignation. "Wa-al, I reckon he 's slipped us. He 'll be pretty close to Texas by now." He gazed at Stanton and Lisbeth with a defiant embarrassment. "Templin 's gone, all right, I reckon. But we 've got to make a search just the same, if you ain't objectin'."

There being no objection, Norton called several of his men and ordered them to search the premises, while, without being invited, he dropped heavily into a chair near Templin and heaved a deep sigh.

"Don't know thet I was exactly yearnin' to ketch up with Templin, anyway," he said grinning faintly. "Law is law, all right, an' thar 's got to be some one to apply it. But thar 's times when a man don't relish applyin' it."

"Meaning that you think Templin may not be guilty?" suggested Lisbeth. She did not look at Templin as she spoke.

"Guilty!" laughed Norton. "Sure as you 're born, Templin 's guilty. I was n't botherin' none about thet. It was just thet me an' life ain't quarrelin' yet. I 'm figgerin' to hang on a spell, an' if we 'd ketch up to Templin thar would n't be nothin' certain about thet."

"Templin 's bad medicine, eh?" said Stanton.

Only Lisbeth saw his quick glance at the man he was discussing, who sat there calmly gazing southward.

"You 're right, Stanton; Templin 's slick an' bad. Don't let nobody tell you different. Templin 's poison! Thet gun hand of his'n moves like a sidewinder strikin'! He 's a mean, miserable coyote! He don't hev no mercy on nobody!"

Again Stanton glanced swiftly at Templin. The latter was still gazing southward.

"What do you mean, sheriff?" Lisbeth's voice was steady. She meant to know as much about Templin as Norton could tell her. More: she wanted Templin to hear what was said. She felt a vindictive satisfaction in knowing that Templin was within sound of her voice, for he would know that his bland manner had n't deceived her; he

would know that she meant to vindicate her distrust of him.

"What do I mean? Wa-al, I reckon I mean what I said. Templin don't hev no mercy on any one, man or woman. He 's one of them guys which laughs in the face of a man he 's downed, gloatin' over him."

"You mean he seeks trouble; that he deliberately shoots other men?"

"Thet 's exactly what I mean. Templin 's the sort of guy which makes it hard to represent the law in this country. It 's such hellions as him thet cause all the trouble around hyar!"

"What is Templin wanted for now, Norton?"

Lisbeth spoke slow and distinctly. She again glanced at Templin, and was rather startled to see that he had turned his head and was watching her intently.

"Templin 's wanted for murder!" declared Norton.

"Would you mind explaining? Since it appears Templin has been in this vicinity, I am interested."

"Nothin' to explain, ma'am. Templin's been hellin' around Wilcox. Seems like he 's been workin' out of thar, makin' Wilcox his headquarters. Different cattlemen hev been reportin' missin' stock. They 'd go hyar one night, an' thar the next night.

Robbery an' murder has been goin' on regular. Curious part about it is thet no one ever got sight of Templin pullin' off his raidin'. Some hev got close enough to him to tell by his figger thet it was him doin' the raidin'. Either thet or he 'd be in the gang thet was doin' it. Sure, thet ain't evidence. A man has got to be caught with the goods or he ain't caught at all.

"Templin was always slick enough to get away without bein' caught. Thet is, he was slick enough until he pulled off the last job. Thet happened in Wilcox. Ernie Putt an' Jeff Barkwell run into Templin in front of Cheever's store. Putt an' Barkwell hev lived in Wilcox for years, an' was respected citizens.

"Templin had got into town unknown to me, though I 'd been lookin' for him. I was away over to Dry Lake when it happened."

"When what happened, sheriff?"

"Why, when Templin shot Putt an' Barkwell. Killed 'em cold right in front of Cheever's. Both shots plumb center.

"Ed King seen it. Thar was n't no words spoke, King says. The three of them met in front of the store. King says Putt an' Barkwell seemed peaceable. Templin went for his gun.

"When I got back from Dry Lake thar was Putt

an' Barkwell cold as mackerel, an' Templin gone. Some one seen him headin' east. He had too good a start. By the time I got a posse together he was hittin' the breeze for fair!"

Norton got up. His men were coming toward him from various directions; he stepped down from the veranda to hear from them that there was no sign of Templin.

"Wa-al," said Norton; "I reckon it ain't no use hittin' the south trail. He 's into the bad lands by this time. I 'm apologizin' for bustin' in on you this way; an' I 'm thankin' you for settin' thar listenin' to my gassin'. But I 'm right sorry our Eastern friend thar did n't plug Templin when he seen him foolin' around the corral this mornin'. I 'm sure right sorry."

"We share that regret, I assure you, sheriff," remarked the pseudo Lanning. His voice was a slow drawl; his eyes were steady, enigmatic. "You know Templin very well, I presume. Templin may come back; it is not improbable that he may again visit the Last Hope. In that case we should probably not know him. Don't you think you ought to describe him so that we won't shoot an innocent person?"

Norton reddened. "Thought you said you saw him this mornin'?" he demanded.

"At a considerable distance, sheriff. I saw a man in the corral, but I could not distinguish his features. Tell us what he is like?"

Norton frowned; the fingers of one hand went up, pushed his hat aside. He stood there undecided, scratching his head.

"Templin 's a tall guy," he began, only to pause and stare around at his men, who had halted close to him.

"A tall guy," repeated Templin. "Well, that 's a good start. But there are many tall men in this country, I suppose."

"Keep your shirt on, Lanning," growled Norton. "I ain't very good at describin' a guy. I keep forgettin' what Templin looks like. Sure as the devil he 's got white hair, though; white hair thet 's long an' scraggly."

"I heard a guy say Templin's hair was yaller," spoke a member of the posse.

"Fact is," admitted Norton; "I ain't never seen Templin. Folks has described him to me. Ed King, who saw Templin drill Putt an' Barkwell, says Templin rode a roan horse."

"A man does n't deserve shooting because he rides a roan horse, Norton."

"No, damn it, he don't!" snapped Norton, glaring at Templin. "But Templin ought to be shot no

matter what color the horse he rides. An' thar ain't so damned many roan horses runnin' around this country thet thar 'd be more than one of them runnin' ahead of a sheriff's posse. Use your head, Lanning. If the man who rode thet roan horse thet you seen this mornin' was on the level he 'd hev asked permission to break into the Last Hope corral."

"The man I saw rode away from the Last Hope on a piebald horse, sheriff. Would that fact justify us in shooting every man we saw riding a piebald horse?"

"Bah!" grunted Norton. "You Eastern dudes is sure irritatin'! If you see a man ridin' a piebald horse you 'd better go into the house an' hide or the piebald would be eatin' you for loco weed!"

Norton bowed to Lisbeth and Stanton.

"Wa-al, I reckon we 'll be headin' back. The farther a man gets away from home the more curiosities he runs into!"

He strode away with his men, who glanced back at Templin on the veranda and smiled hugely. Five minutes later the posse rode westward in a dust-cloud.

For five minutes after the departure of the posse there was no word spoken on the veranda. Lisbeth sat very rigid, staring after the sheriff and his

men. Templin lounged in his chair, seemingly gravely meditating. Stanton, his face expressionless, watched Templin and Lisbeth.

Lisbeth was first to move. She got up, stood for an instant gazing westward, and then turned to Templin.

"Well," she said scornfully, "you fooled them. And I almost lied for you, after telling you I would n't! What sort of a man are you? Why all this mystery? Why do you hide your identity? You kill two men in Wilcox, yet no one can describe you.

"You come here looking like a desperado. You appropriate my father's clothing; you shave and compel me to cut your hair; and instantly you appear to be an Easterner, educated, and cultured. What does it all mean? Why are you here?"

Templin rose, bowed.

"I imagine you will know presently why I am here," he said calmly. "Did you ever hear of Blaisdell's Riders?"

Lisbeth's face paled; Stanton got halfway out of his chair.

"I see you have heard of them," went on Templin. "There never has been an outlaw with a worse reputation than Blaisdell. Look east, Stanton. There are Blaisdell and some of his men!"

Stanton and Lisbeth both turned. Not more than two or three miles on the desert eastward from the Last Hope came a dust-cloud. Ahead of it were several horses. They were coming straight for the ranch-house.

CHAPTER IV

THREE GRIM RIDERS

STANTON'S face had suddenly become gray. He had tensed; every muscle in his body seemed to have contracted. He stood rigid, staring at the advancing dust-cloud, and when he at last turned to Lisbeth she could see that his eyes, while steady, were alight with a terrible apprehension.

"Lisbeth, go to your room," he said.

He spoke lowly, composedly, but there was a ring of command in his voice. The girl stared at him for an instant, interpreting his expression. Then she silently nodded her head and moved toward the kitchen door.

Reaching the door she glanced at Templin. Templin was looking straight at her. His eyes were squinted a little, as though he was grimly amused.

She was certain he felt no resentment for her scornful references to him a few minutes before; the serene calm that had characterized his manner from the instant she had first seen him was as pronounced now as it had been when he had ridden up to the

veranda before chastising Philippe. He was as unperturbed, as unconcerned, as he had seemed while undergoing Norton's scrutiny.

Her father's manner had disturbed Lisbeth, had frightened her because the apprehension he expressed had seemed to be for her. Templin's eyes reassured her; the atmosphere of calm confidence that surrounded him swept toward her, enveloped her. Strange it was how this man had the power to inspire her with his moods.

Rebellion seethed in her; she fought against yielding to the spell of him, though she could not deny that she was not succeeding. His lack of excitement with Blaisdell and his men approaching had a calming effect upon her, and she bowed stiffly to him as she crossed the kitchen.

She did not obey her father's orders to go to her room. She took her rifle from its pegs, and with it in her hands she seated herself far back in the kitchen, where she could look out upon the veranda.

Stories of the depredations of Blaisdell and his men had reached her ears; details of their crimes had shocked her, had caused her to wonder how men could be so lawless. She had heard how Blaisdell's Riders were feared and hated.

The law, represented by Sheriff Norton, had been impotent to check Blaisdell's men or even to restrict

their activities. Like apparitions they rode out of the mystic desert haze; as suddenly and as mysteriously they vanished. No one knew whence they came; none could be found who could trail them to their rendezvous.

So far, Blaisdell's Riders had not molested the Last Hope. Now they were coming.

Lisbeth had observed the queer grayness that had settled over her father's face. Courageous as Stanton was, he feared Blaisdell's Riders. The terrible apprehension that had shone in his eyes now haunted her. She gazed outward to see Stanton still standing rigid on the veranda. The dust-cloud was nearer; she could see it and the horses loping ahead of it. There were three riders.

She saw her father and Templin standing on the veranda; Stanton where he had stood all along; Templin nearer the kitchen door where he could not be seen by the riders on the desert. She saw her father nod toward Templin.

Then Templin opened the screen-door, stepped into the kitchen, looked at her, and crossed the room to the stairs. She had detected a dancing gleam in Templin's eyes as his gaze had met hers; otherwise he was as serenely unperturbed as he had been all along.

He mounted the stairs. A little later Lisbeth

could hear him walking about over her head. More quickly than she had anticipated she heard the beating of hoofs on the hard sand surrounding the ranch-house and Blaisdell's Riders came into view. They swept up to the edge of the veranda near where Stanton stood.

They were three tall, bronzed men with bold, rugged faces. Fascinated, Lisbeth watched them as they drew their horses to a halt. One of the men, who seemed to be the leader, drew off his leather gantlets and beat the dust from them by striking them against the leather chaps that adorned his legs.

The man was broad, lithe, imposing. From where she stood, Lisbeth could see that his eyes were the cold gray of the cynic and skeptic; there was no warmth in them, no sign of good feeling. The rider was domineering, ruthless. In his steady gaze was alert distrust and a glint of eagerness.

"I reckon you 're Stanton," he said, looking at the other.

"I 'm Stanton."

The gray had disappeared from Stanton's face; he was cool, quiet; his voice was low and steady. If he had felt any fear of the men it had gone, or he was a clever dissembler. Lisbeth admired him at this moment.

"I suppose you are Blaisdell," continued Stanton.

The leader started. He leaned forward searching Stanton's eyes with a glance of suspicion. Then his voice leaped.

"Where in hell did you get that idea I 'm Blaisdell?" he demanded. "What got you to thinkin' about Blaisdell?"

"Everybody in this country thinks about Blaisdell," replied Stanton.

"Well there 's some sense in that," said the man. "Blaisdell 's been givin' 'em somethin' to think about. But that ain't got nothin' to do with what we 're here for. We 're lookin' for a guy named Ned Templin. You seen him?"

Stanton faced westward, where went a dust-cloud. The tall rider did not shift his gaze from Stanton's face.

"We seen that," he said shortly. "A dozen men rode away from here a little while ago. We figgered it was Norton an' a posse. What was they doin' here?"

"Looking for Templin," replied Stanton. "Templin must be getting popular."

"Did they find Templin?" the rider snapped the question at Stanton.

"No. But Templin's horse was here; they found him in my corral. A piebald horse was missing.

I think Templin must have come during the night. The horse he left is lame."

"Last night, eh?" The rider's eyes gleamed with eagerness. "That 's a hell of a lead, for a man like Templin. You know which way Templin went?"

Stanton shook his head negatively.

The rider laughed shortly. "South, of course. There ain't any other way he could go. East an' north he 'd have run into us. West, he 'd be goin' back the way he come. Well, Stanton, rustle up some grub. Move fast, an' show some hospitality!"

The rider grinned felinely into Stanton's face as he dismounted. The other men also slipped off their horses. One man sauntered to the rear of the veranda, stood there for an instant staring off into the desert and then vanished around the corner of the ranch-house.

The outlaw leader stepped upon the veranda, took a drink from the olla, wiped his lips with the back of a hand, and stood watching Stanton. Stanton had tried his best to exhibit unconcern for the movements of the man who had disappeared around the corner of the ranch-house, but he had not been able to resist one single apprehensive glance at the man as he vanished.

"Nervous, Stanton?" mocked the tall leader. "Don't mind Bill. That 's Bill's one failin': he 'll nose around. But if Templin ain't here you don't need to worry none. You ain't been lyin' none, have you, Stanton? There ain't no one around here that you 're ashamed to show off, is there?"

The leader's manner was strangely gentle. It seemed he was trying to conceal a huge amusement, that he and his men meditated something sinister, which they sought to accomplish without violence.

"I 'm not trying to conceal anything," said Stanton. He was wondering if Lisbeth had obeyed him. He contrived to smile at the leader as he moved toward the kitchen door, though his conviction that there was personal menace in the man's attitude was strong.

He had a divination that if he turned his back for an instant the action would provoke violence. He moved in a sidelong manner toward the door, observing that the third man stood with folded arms, steadily watching him, his lips in a half-smile, his eyes gleaming strangely.

Stanton was a brave man, but not foolhardy, and he knew he would have no chance with these men if he were to provoke violence. Both the leader and the other man were watching him, with seem-

ingly negligent glances, but Stanton knew both were alert, prepared.

"I 'll just step in and get things ready for you, boys," he said.

In order to open the screen-door he was compelled to turn his back to the outlaw leader, who stood within three or four feet of him. He moved quickly and tried to dodge as a shadow flitted in his vision.

Then he tumbled forward, reeled against the screen-door, and fell heavily, soundlessly, to the floor of the veranda. The outlaw leader stood over him, clubbed pistol in hand, grinning.

"He got wise mighty sudden, Stagg," he said to the other outlaw.

Still grinning, the leader opened the screen-door. A lance-like streak of fire darted from the semi-gloom of the kitchen; a rifle crashed venomously.

The outlaw reeled back from the doorway, cursing, holding a hand to his cheek.

From the interior of the kitchen came sounds as of heavy shoes scuffling upon the floor, and a dull crash as of a chair being overturned. Then the man who had gone around the corner of the ranch-house appeared in the doorway. Struggling in his arms, fighting him desperately, was Lisbeth.

"Got her!" grinned her captor. "She shore is

one hell of a fighter! I reckon if I had n't knocked thet rifle up we 'd hev been requisitionin' the mourners about now, Kelton!" He shoved the door open, lifted Lisbeth bodily, and carried her out upon the veranda, where he held her tightly to him and grinned into her eyes.

"Shore as hell yore a beauty!" he exclaimed. "Blaisdell 's got more sense than I 've give him credit for. Seen you once in Wilcox, he says; an' that once was enough for him. I reckon if I had n't snuck up on you that-a-way Kelton would n't be so active now. After this when comp'ny comes don't leave yore back door open!"

Lisbeth was trying to break from his grasp that she might go to her father, who was lying motionless near the door. She had said no word until now, having fought silently when the man had surprised her by coming upon her from behind just as she had snapped a shot at Kelton.

"Yore dad 's all right," consoled her captor; "thet tap on the head Belton give him was n't none dangerous. You just hold still so we won't hev to tie you up an' slip a gag into yore mouth. Thar ain't nothin' goin' to happen to you, any more than thet yore goin' to see Blaisdell! Haw, haw, haw! Why, Blaisdell—he 's a jim-dandy, ma'am!

Smooth an' slick as silk. Blaisdell 's complimentin' you a heap by sendin' us boys hyar after—"

With his mouth open he paused and stared at his outlaw comrades.

Kelton, still on the veranda, was backing away from the screen-door, which had been flung wide open. He seemed to have forgotten the wound in his cheek and the red stream that was pouring from it downward to stain the front of his shirt. Kelton's hands were flung wide as though he were trying to grasp invisible objects on each side of him, his mouth also was open, and his eyes were alight with amazement as he stared at the open doorway.

Stagg, standing at the edge of the veranda, seemed paralyzed.

Swiftly, divining that a terrible apparition had suddenly confronted his confederates, Lisbeth's captor released her, wheeled in his tracks, and faced the door.

"Hell's fire!" he shrieked; "Ned Templin!"

CHAPTER V

GUN-PLAY

KELTON halted, dropped his hands to his sides. A ghastly grayness came into his face. He stood motionless staring at Templin. Stagg did not move from his position at the edge of the veranda. His mouth had popped open, his gaze was still vacuous.

Bill, Lisbeth's captor, stood beside the girl. He seemed as rigid as one of the posts of the veranda. His mouth was still open; he had not closed it after uttering the shriek of recognition. A strange paralysis seemed to have seized the three outlaws.

Stanton had not changed position. Although Lisbeth knew her father was in dire need of attention, she did not move toward him. It was as though a heavy hand had been laid upon her, rooting her to the spot where she stood.

Violence, more deadly than that which had struck her father, was imminent. Impending, hovering close, was death. Lisbeth knew it. Knowledge of the same sort was in Kelton's eyes, in Stagg's, and in Bill's.

Templin's eyes were enigmatic. Plain in them was the cold unconcern Lisbeth had seen before; the calm serenity she had observed with her first inspection of him was still in the atmosphere around him. On his lips was the faint half-smile she had observed at times when he seemed to be amused. He could n't feel amused now, she was certain, and yet the smile was there. She noted, however, that the smile had a different quality; his lips were a little stiffer than usual; they were curved with slight mockery, with a waywardness that was almost wanton. His eyes, too, seemed to have changed a little —much, she decided as she watched them. They had strange flecks in them, flint-like points.

The Templin who stood in the doorway was much like the Templin who had used the quirt on Philippe Mendezo. There was this difference: the Templin who had chastised Philippe had been a passionless individual, while the Templin who was now facing the three outlaws was in the humor to do violence.

He had changed his clothing again; he was arrayed in the garb he had worn when he had ridden up to the edge of the veranda out of the desert. His hair had been cut, and he had shaved. That was the only difference.

He now was well groomed, where before he had

seemed wild and uncouth. Around his slim waist was the cartridge-belt he had discarded when he had donned the clothing of Eastern cut; in the black leather holster at his right hip was the heavy revolver he had worn when she first saw him.

He seemed not to notice Lisbeth.

"Kelton," he said, "I reckon Blaisdell put you on my trail."

Kelton silently nodded.

"You did n't need much urgin', Kelton?"

Kelton's face reddened, slowly paled in the silence that followed.

"Speak right up, Kelton. I reckon we ain't mistakin' each other. Blaisdell did n't have to urge you none?"

"Nary an urge!" snapped the other.

Templin, Lisbeth noted, had reverted to the idiomatic, ungrammatical speech he had used before he had donned the Eastern clothing. Strangely, when he spoke in that manner, he seemed more virile, more rugged, more natural than when he spoke in the language of the East. But that, she knew, might be because this situation was different from the others.

"Kelton," said Templin, "I reckon he did n't. You 'd be a heap eager to trail me if you thought there 'd be a chance of gettin' me at a disadvantage. You an' me never got along. Kelton, I reckon

you 've always been a bit envious because you know I can sling a gun a little faster than you."

"Hell!" sneered Kelton. "You 've never proved it!"

Templin smiled faintly. "Shucks," he said gently.

It was as though the exclamation had been made to conceal a sigh of regret.

"Always yearnin' for trouble, Kelton," he added. "There never was any use arguin' with you. Stagg," he went on, addressing the latter and appearing to have decided upon the futility of persuading Kelton, "I reckon you did n't need any urgin', either?"

"Templin," replied Stagg, "I 'm givin' it to you straight. I 'd a heap ruther Blaisdell had sent me hoofin' it into old Cochise's camp!"

"Stagg, I 'm believin' you. You never was dead set on headin' into trouble." He now looked at Bill, though it was noticeable to Lisbeth that he did not turn his head from Kelton, but seemed to watch the three men with a steady, probing stare that would catch the slightest move made by any of them.

"Givins," he said, "how about you? Was you pinin' to run into me?"

"Nary a pine, Templin!" quickly answered the other. "Fact is, I got a heap of goose-flesh on me

when Blaisdell turned them eyes of his'n on me an' told me I was goin'. Templin, thar ain't never been no bad blood between you an' me!"

"Givins," said Templin slowly, "an' you, Stagg, an' you, Kelton! I 'm askin' you to do a heap of listenin'. I got to the Last Hope this mornin'. I 'm goin' to stay here. I ain't doin' any explainin'. Nobody 's goin' to get away from here to spread word around that I 'm here. You boys would have got off clean if you had n't got an idea you wanted to get tangled up with a woman."

"Thet was Blaisdell's notion," said Bill.

"Well, then, your mistake was in followin' Blaisdell's orders about stealin' Miss Stanton. I reckon it don't make a heap of difference, though. You boys come here an' make it certain that I 've got to show myself. That brings me back to where I was. I reckon you understand.

"Nobody 's goin' to get away from here to tell folks I 'm here. You gettin' that plain?"

"Templin, you mean thar 's goin' to be gunplay?"

The speaker was Givins. He was visibly nervous. His face had grown ashen.

"Givins, that 's how it shapes up. There 's a way out for the three of you. There 'll be no killin' if you boys will hit the breeze out of the country

without leavin' word where you 've gone, an' givin' your promise that you 'll not mention meetin' me here."

"Thet means we 've got to slope without seein' Blaisdell again?" Givins spoke jerkily, while covertly searching the faces of his confederates.

"Givins, you 've got intelligence."

"Hell!" exclaimed Givins. "I 'm hittin' the breeze out of the damn country right now! I ain't wantin' no truck with a guy of yore disposition."

He backed away, reached his horse. No word was spoken by Stagg or Kelton while Givins moved. Stagg was watching Templin steadily. He continued to watch until he heard the creaking of saddle-leather, which advertised that Givins was mounting his horse. Then Stagg's gaze wavered, his mouth opened, his lips moved.

"I reckon this game 's a heap too uncertain for me," he said; "I 'm aimin' to change my habits of livin'!"

He backed away, casting a sidelong glance at Kelton as he moved. Stagg reached his horse and climbed into the saddle. Neither he nor Givins made an attempt to depart.

Templin's left hand was raised, the palm toward them. Both men understood the significance of the

motion. Templin was signaling them to wait. Something was going to happen.

Templin was not looking at Givins and Stagg; his gaze was fixed upon Kelton with terrible definiteness. Templin was no longer at ease in the doorway. His body had stiffened, he was leaning a little forward, his legs slightly a-sprawl.

Waiting, tense and eager, Givins and Stagg heard Templin say:

"Kelton, talk straight an' plain! Are you thowin' in with Givins and Stagg, or are you still trailin' with Blaisdell?"

"Templin, I 'm stayin' with Blaisdell. You can't herd-ride me!"

"Templin spoke to the other men, though his gaze was still fixed upon Kelton.

"Givins an' Stagg," he said slowly, "you 're stayin' here a little while—to plant Kelton." He now spoke to Kelton.

"Kelton," he said, "you 're choosin' your own time. Throw your gun!"

Instantly Kelton acted. His right hand, which had been hanging at his side, moved upward with a flashing motion.

In his eyes was the light of victory, for while his own hand moved Templin's was merely poised at a little distance from the holster at his hip.

And yet while Kelton's fingers were closing around the butt of his weapon Templin's gun was spouting fire. Twice long lance flames darted from Templin's right hip and ended at Kelton's chest.

Upon Kelton's face was an expression of great amazement. He had got his gun out, but his weakening fingers could not hold it. It dropped at his feet. He sank toward it, as though seeking it, but toppled gently forward and lay, his head resting upon one arm, as if sleeping. Twice his fingers twitched and then became rigid.

"I reckon you had to have it, Kelton," said Templin.

He walked to the edge of the veranda and motioned to Givins and Stagg. The men slid off their horses and came forward. They seized Kelton's limp figure and bore it away. Templin followed them.

Not until the men had gone did Lisbeth move. Then she shuddered and sank into the chair.

She sat there a long time. She felt she must have fainted, for when she again became conscious of what was going on around her she was lying back in the chair staring dully at the beams in the ceiling of the veranda.

She was trying to remember what had happened when she heard a groan, and turned her head to see

her father leaning against the wall near the kitchen door, looking at her. He had managed to get to his feet but was reeling dizzily.

Lisbeth darted toward him. Though her own legs were trembling with weakness, she managed to get Stanton into the house and upon a couch in the living-room. There she bathed his head and gave him stimulants. Twice when she went into the kitchen for water and bandages, she glanced out of the windows dreadingly. There were no signs of Templin and the others.

She worked for fully an hour with Stanton. For a time it seemed he must have suffered a fracture, for he lay motionless, staring at Lisbeth with glazed, unseeing eyes. But when it appeared that he would not regain consciousness, that her efforts were to be in vain, he suddenly smiled at her.

"Lisbeth," he said, "Kelton hit me, did n't he?" At her nod he went on: "I heard shooting and talking. But I could n't get things straight in my mind and could n't see what was happening."

Lisbeth told him.

"Templin 's a mystery," he smiled. "But—somehow—I like him—I trust him."

Then, with Lisbeth at his side, Stanton fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI

AN ENIGMATIC MAN

DUSK had come when Lisbeth, sitting in the kitchen, heard a step on the veranda. She did not move as the steps came nearer; she did not even look up when she heard the screen-door open. She knew Templin was there.

Several times during the afternoon she had seen him outside. Once he had stood at the fence of the horse-corral, leaning against it, staring eastward. Another time she had seen him standing at the stable door, and once he had come upon the veranda to drink from the olla.

But she had not appeared to notice him; at least she had not permitted him to see that she had been watching him. She had not yet got the scene of the killing out of her mind, and she felt she never would. For even though she knew Kelton had deserved killing, she felt the act had been murder. He knew he had no chance with Templin. Templin had known it. Lisbeth had seen that Templin had appeared to

give him a chance. Yet all the time Templin had known Kelton would have no chance.

To be sure, Templin had offered him his liberty under a condition; and perhaps Kelton should have accepted the condition. But there remained the bald fact that Templin had deliberately killed. That was what Lisbeth had to face, the scene of Templin shooting the man down.

Perhaps, if Kelton had been the first, Lisbeth might have condoned the offense. But there were the two men Templin had killed in Wilcox; there were his other crimes, which he had not denied to Sheriff Norton; and no doubt there were other murders.

Ned Templin was an outlaw. Her father had told her about him; Sheriff Norton had been seeking him; his action in shooting Kelton had been visible evidence of his venomous disposition.

Besides, Templin was bold, reckless, dominating. He had an iron will, a ruthless manner. He would have his own way; there was no stopping him.

He was an enigma, a menace, a mystery. Against her will she was interested in him, and when he lingered at the door, standing there silently, she at last was forced to look up at him.

"Well?" she interrogated belligerently.

"It got sort of lonesome outside," he said slowly.

"So you thought you would come in here without an invitation," she said, her voice still belligerent.

"I reckon that 's it. But I 'm here."

There was something in his tone which carried the implication that his words were final, like his presence. He meant to stay whether she liked it or not.

"I suppose we are powerless to prevent your staying," she answered. "Father seems to be hurt rather bad, and you don't seem to be gentleman enough to leave at my request."

He moved away from the door, walking to the entrance to the living-room without answering. He peered into the living-room, saw Stanton lying motionless on the couch, and turned to Lisbeth.

"I reckon he 's hurt bad?"

"Bad enough," she returned shortly. "I thought at first he had suffered a fracture. But I think not. He has regained consciousness and has spoken to me. He was rational."

"That 's good. Kelton must have hit him quite a clip."

He stood near the living-room door through a heavy silence. Then he walked to a chair and dropped into it, stretching his legs and heaving a deep sigh.

"I 'm sure a heap tired," he confessed. "Not

havin' done any sleepin' for two nights, I 'm sort of yearnin' for a bunk. Is there a bed in the house that ain't workin'?"

"We have a spare bedroom down-stairs—if you feel that you must impose your presence upon us."

"I 'll take it without further recommendation," he said.

For a time she sat, staring out of the doorway and listening to her father's deep, regular breathing. When the darkness became so dense that she could not see Templin's face she got up and lit a lamp. He sat with folded arms watching her.

Templin's presence irritated her. She and her father owed him something for what he had done, and she believed she would have acknowledged the debt had it not been for Templin's self-assurance, his boldness, and the steady serenity of his eyes whenever she caught a glimpse of them.

"Your room is ready whenever you want it," she coldly informed him.

"I ain't as tired as I was," he drawled.

"You must have wonderful recuperative powers," she mocked.

"I reckon."

"Why play the hypocrite?" she demanded. "At least with me? I know you can speak the language of civilization. Then why speak that jargon?"

"Lazy, I reckon." He persisted in using the "jargon." "A man takes on the character of his environment. The Western dialect is picturesque, is n't it?"

"Perhaps. But it is not—not what one ought to use, especially one who has been taught better."

"We 'll say it 's just preference."

"Then, I should say your preferences are not commendable."

"Oh, shucks, I reckon you 're tryin' to quarrel with me!" He leaned back in his chair and regarded her gravely. "You 're still holdin' that tonsorial job ag'in' me," he said gently. "You had n't ought to. You see, some one had to cut that shock of hair, an' you was the only one around.

"Figure it this way: If you had n't cut my hair the sheriff would have known me. He an' his posse would have taken me back to Wilcox, an' I would n't have been here to keep Kelton from takin' you to Blaisdell."

"Well, I suppose I 'm to feel grateful for that."

"Don't do it if it 's goin' to strain you any," he said mockingly. "The chances are that I 'd have had it out with Kelton, anyway. That was bound to come."

"You mean you would have had to kill him?"

"Yep. You see, he had a notion that he could

beat me to the draw. He 's entertained that notion for a considerable time. It 's odd how a notion like that will take hold of a man; but once he gets it he 's gone; it 'll keep runnin' around in his head until he can't think of anything else."

"Well, I hope you are satisfied; you have killed him."

Her gaze was level. "But I suppose killing people is no novelty to you," she added.

"You 're tryin' to be disagreeable. You don't give a man credit; you don't say nothin' about me lettin' Stagg an' Givins off."

"I presume you did find it hard to let them live. They have gone, I suppose?"

"They were fannin' it north the last time I saw them."

"Do you think they will keep their word to you?"

"I reckon. They understand that if they talk to Blaisdell I 'll see them later."

"You think they are afraid of you, I suppose?"

He refused to be disturbed by her sarcasm. "Stagg an' Givins will be discreet, I reckon," he said quietly.

"Oh! I presume you know them—very well."

"I know them. An' I know Blaisdell."

"I think you do not know Blaisdell as well as you pretend," she said. "For when you saw the riders

coming you told us Blaisdell was with them. You were mistaken."

"I reckon I was."

"What made you think Blaisdell was coming? Did you expect him?"

He looked quickly at her, yawned, and got up.

"I 'm gettin' powerful tired ag'in," he said. "That bed you talked about gets more an' more invitin'. I keep seein' it. I reckon I 'll say good night. If you 're feelin' better natured in the mornin' I 'll talk to you agin."

He bowed to her, walked through the living-room to a half-open door. He peered inside, turned and smiled at Lisbeth, stepped through the doorway, and closed the door behind him. Almost instantly he stuck his head out to say: "If you 're needin' any help with your dad to-night don't hesitate to call me. Good night."

Lisbeth did not answer. She sat very still for some minutes wrestling with a futile rage that was not unmixed with grim amusement. She wanted to be angry, but discovered that her rage was not deep nor sincere.

There was too much curiosity in her, too much amazement, too much concern for her father. The concern conquered. She got up, went to her father, and tried to forget Templin.

She sat beside her father until he awakened. She discovered that he was feeling much better; so she helped him up-stairs to his room, after which she entered her own room, to sit for some time on the edge of the bed thinking of Templin.

CHAPTER VII

THE STIRRING OF CHIVALRY

TEMPLIN arose with the dawn. As he moved cautiously through the house he heard no sounds from the second floor. Silently he opened the front door, went on to the veranda, and stood there for some seconds looking about.

Then he strode to the stable, where he had concealed his saddle and bridle, got out brush, razor, and mirror, and proceeded to the water-trough under the windmill and shaved himself. Restoring his shaving-kit to the slicker, he hid saddle and bridle and returned to the house. In the kitchen he found a clean towel and soap. He washed his face and hands, combed his hair, and again went out upon the veranda.

Yesterday he had used Stanton's outfit to shave himself. He did not remember whether he had told Lisbeth he possessed such an outfit. Yesterday he had been in a hurry, and he might have lied. It made little difference as long as one could lie plausi-

bly. It was not always convenient to tell the truth.

Suppose he were to tell the truth about the circumstances that had brought him to the Last Hope? Suppose he were to tell the truth about the killing of Putt and Barkwell?

Tell Lisbeth? He thought not. He stared eastward. His thoughts were as derisive as his smile. Lisbeth would never know through his telling her. The girl had enough to contend with; secret, sinister forces were marshaling against her.

He was glad he had come to the Last Hope, glad he had obeyed the strange impulse that had seized him, glad that his curiosity had driven him to see the girl whose beauty had been discussed in numerous cow-camps.

He had come in time; he had been on hand when the first blow had been struck; he was determined to be near when the others came. For there would be other blows. Blaisdell was not the man to be defeated at the first attempt.

Templin heard the screen-door open. He sat very still, staring straight ahead, pretending absorption, although he knew Lisbeth's step.

Responding to her salutation, he got up, bowed to her, and stood silently watching her, observing that she was slightly pale and anxious.

"How is your father?" he asked quickly.

"Father puzzles me. He is awake; he apparently has no fever. He looks at me, answers me rationally enough; seems to be resting easy, without pain. But he seems preoccupied, and his eyes lack the quick intelligence that has always been in them. He seems the same, and yet there is a difference in him that baffles me."

"That was quite a rap Kelton gave him, I reckon. But I expect he 'll be comin' around. Mebbe I 'd better run up an' have a look at him. An' there 's a doctor in Cochise."

"Don't go up now, please," she said. "He was going to sleep when I left him."

She walked close to Templin, so close that he could have reached out and touched her, and then stood very still and rigid, gazing into his eyes. There was a quiet determination in her manner that made his eyes kindle. She was afraid of him, yet she was going to pretend she was n't.

"Templin," she said, "there are several things I want to know, and I think you can tell me."

"I 'm listenin'."

"Who *are* you? And what are you here for?"

"I 'm Ned Templin. I stopped here because my horse went lame."

Very quietly she answered: "I don't believe you. At least, I do not believe you are telling the entire

truth. When you talked with Sheriff Norton your name was Lawrence Lanning. No man can have two names. One of yours must be an alias. Which is it?"

"Ma'am, I 'm not makin' any confessions this mornin'."

"That is your way of telling me to mind my own business, I suppose," she said quietly. "As a matter of fact, names do not make much difference. You are you, no matter what name you adopt. But you certainly don't expect me to believe you came here merely because your horse went lame?"

"That 's what I told you, ma'am."

"Templin, you are keeping something back, something I feel sure I ought to know. If your coming here was on account of your horse going lame why did you say this to Kelton: 'Kelton, I reckon Blaisdell put you on my trail'?"

"Mebbe I had that notion, ma'am."

"Templin," she said scornfully, "I believe you are afraid to tell the truth. I do not believe Kelton expected to find you here. He would not have been so amazed at sight of you if he had been searching for you and expecting to find you at the Last Hope. And while we were standing on the veranda before Blaisdell's Riders came, you seemed to know they were coming. You named them before you could

see their faces. How did you know they were Blaisdell's Riders?"

"Guessin', I reckon."

"Templin, you are deliberately lying to me!"

Templin did not answer.

"You see!" she charged. "You have no answer!" Her voice changed; there was a pleading note in it. "Templin," she said, "please tell me what it all means! You come here as Ned Templin, the outlaw. You change your clothes and become Lawrence Lanning. A posse follows you, accusing you of murder. My father returns, finds you here, and helps you to escape the law.

"Blaisdell's Riders come, attempt to seize me. There is mysterious talk between you and them—talk that gives the impression that you and they have been friends, but now are enemies. You kill Kelton and warn the two other men that they are not to tell any one you are here. You declare you are going to stay here. Why do you mean to stay here?"

"Just tired of runnin' around, I reckon."

"Ah, Templin, that subterfuge is too shallow."

Lisbeth felt that she could not force him to tell her anything; that he intended keeping his knowledge to himself. The conviction dismayed her because it vindicated her fears of a secret and terrible menace.

"Templin," she said, "tell me this at least: have you come here to harm father?"

"No."

She looked straight into his eyes. They were steady, grave, sincere.

"Well," she said, "I suppose I shall have to be satisfied. I don't want you here; I feel certain trouble is coming. But you won't go away, I can't drive you away, and father doesn't seem to care."

She sank to a chair and stared at the flaming lances of the rising sun. An atmosphere of dull resignation seemed to have settled around her. In her eyes was a confession of impotence. She was baffled.

Yet she discerned one golden thread of hope in the fabric of tragedy that the events of the day had woven around her. That was the grave sincerity of Templin's eyes when he said he intended no harm to her father.

Templin was silent, watching her. The admiration he felt for her he kept invisible. She was pale; there was the light of a terrible anxiety in her eyes; he knew she must be enduring agony of uncertainty about himself, about Blaisdell. He knew she felt that though one tragedy had happened another impended.

If she had heard of Blaisdell at all—and he knew

she had from the way she had started when he had mentioned the outlaw's name—she knew it was not Blaisdell's way to defer any action once started. He was determined, relentless. Defeated in his first attempt to take Lisbeth, he would strike again. Templin could give the girl no consolation. Telling her the truth about himself and relating to her what he knew about Blaisdell would not help her.

What would her reactions be if he should tell her that he had been a member of Blaisdell's outlaw band for several years, and that Blaisdell had valued him so highly that he and the outlaw chief had almost clashed when the break came, and that Blaisdell had ordered his men to kill him on sight —a deed that Blaisdell himself had not dared to attempt single-handed?

What would Lisbeth think if she knew that Templin's break with the outlaw chief had come about because of Lisbeth herself? That he—Templin—had declared to Blaisdell, "When you go to draggin' women around by the hair, I 'm through!"

Those had been his words, uttered upon the impulse of the moment, before he had been seized with the whim to ride to the Last Hope to see the girl Blaisdell had selected for a victim.

Templin was not prepared to declare that his

whim to ride to the Last Hope had been chivalric. Probably curiosity.

But since he had seen Lisbeth his thoughts had been more or less chaotic. Malice toward Blaisdell he certainly bore because of Blaisdell's order to his men that Templin be killed on sight. Pity for Lisbeth he had felt at his first glimpse of her.

Although he had not put the thought into words, his first glance into Lisbeth's eyes had steeled him against Blaisdell's intention. Blaisdell would never get her. He would stay at the Last Hope for one purpose, for that purpose.

Templin had n't any false notions. He knew Lisbeth hated him, feared him, despised him. She certainly had a right to feel that way toward him. He had no illusions. His trade did not permit him to think seriously of women; certainly there was nothing in his life as an outlaw to attract feminine interest to himself.

He could n't love as other men loved. But he could serve. What was more to the point, he could disappoint Blaisdell.

Yet he was aware that not in years had he felt so comfortable, so satisfied. Life at the Last Hope was distinctly engaging, if nothing more.

He had felt an odd thrill in standing in the doorway of the ranch-house defending Lisbeth. He had

felt a sort of proprietary interest in the place; for the first time in a long while he had felt responsible. Moreover, despite his conviction that Lisbeth was horror-stricken over the killing of Kelton, he was certain she must feel an impulse of gratitude toward him.

Now, having defended her, and knowing that some time must elapse before word of what had happened could reach the outlaw chief, even if Stagg and Givins should break their promise, he might have warned Lisbeth and Stanton to leave the country or to go to Wilcox, where they would be safe. But that course did not appeal to him because it would mean a breaking up of this new order of things.

He could not go with Lisbeth and her father to Wilcox, even though he should don the eastern clothing that had deceived Sheriff Norton. Possibly the sheriff would not recognize him, but certainly he could not long escape being picked out by the vigilant eyes of the outlaws who had known him for years.

No; he would not suggest Wilcox. But as a means of lifting a load from his conscience he would approach the subject obliquely. He turned slowly and looked at Lisbeth, who was staring at the blazing colors that streaked the horizon.

"You like it here?" he asked.

"No!" she replied shortly, with vindictive emphasis.

He felt a distinct disappointment, but his expression was stoical.

"Your father does, I reckon."

"I suppose so. He would n't stay here otherwise."

"You 're stayin' here because he is."

"Yes. Oh, I hate it! I hate it!"

"Well," said Templin, looking past her into the desolation that stretched to the four horizons, "it has its bad points, for a fact. But even hatin' a place, it seems I 'd hate it more to have some one run me away."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it looks to me as though that 's what Blaisdell is aimin' at, to scare you an' your dad out."

"Blaisdell is going to be disappointed, if that is what he is thinking of doing," she declared. "We are going to stay right here until we get ready to go!"

"You 'd be pretty safe from Blaisdell over in Wilcox," he now suggested.

"We are going to stay right here! Blaisdell would not have attempted what he did attempt if our men had n't left us."

"You mean you ain't got an outfit?"

He saw Blaisdell's hand in that. He had no doubt that the outlaw chief, through threats or cajolery, had induced the Last Hope men to desert. Blaisdell had done that in a number of instances when he had directed his attention to a particular ranch. Not always had he succeeded in drawing off an entire complement of men; but there were always some who could be induced to leave.

"There is n't a man left. One by one they have deserted us. Father went over to Lazette to hire some men. I do not know whether he succeeded."

"How much stock have you got?"

"Three thousand head of cattle."

Templin doubted the statement. With the herds left unprotected, Blaisdell's Riders would deplete them rapidly. Blaisdell always struck swiftly.

"When did the men start leavin'?"

"About two weeks ago. The foreman went first, with three of the men. After that nearly every day one or two would leave."

Templin was acquainted with Blaisdell's methods. When a ranch-owner incurred his enmity, Blaisdell's first move was to deprive him of his men. Then, when the prospective victim was helpless, Blaisdell would strike.

Templin had participated in a number of such events. Nor had he been reluctant to participate in

them. They had provided rare diversion because he had been with the aggressor.

Odd it was what a difference a change of positions made. Chance had placed him at the Last Hope as a defender, and though this position was fully as diverting as the other, there was something added to it.

He was unable exactly to define the emotions that gripped him at the thought of engaging in a war with his former chief. He had not been a champion of the weak. He thought that the answer might be found very near him, in the person of a girl who was watching him.

The incipient chivalric impulse which had impelled him to tell Blaisdell that he could no longer continue his associations with the latter if he meant to fight women had grown amazingly since he had seen the girl Blaisdell had selected as his victim. A strange hatred of Blaisdell had seized him. He grasped that as being something tangible upon which he could base the other emotions that seethed through him.

He did not remember that he had ever liked Blaisdell. Nor had he disliked the man. Now he could see Blaisdell's face when the latter had talked about the girl; he had a vivid recollection of it, and he was astonished to discover that in his mental picture

he saw the outlaw chief in a new light. A new character had developed, and it shone in the man's face. The wonder of it was that he had ever been able to serve under the man, to be near him without shooting him.

Perhaps Templin had some slight suspicion of the leaven that was working in him. The sensation of satisfaction he had felt in being near Lisbeth was not to be misunderstood, and he acknowledged it. Yet because he knew it was futile to hope, he felt the sensation must be disregarded, that he must base his hatred of Blaisdell upon a newly discovered conception of the man's character.

One thing was certain: he hated Blaisdell. It made no difference how that hatred had been aroused, it was in him, and he treasured it.

Had Lisbeth been able to see Templin's eyes at that instant she would have discovered that the calm serenity she had observed in them had gone. Watching his profile she did observe that his lips had tightened and that curious little wrinkles had formed around his eyes. These things warned her that a change had come over him, but before she could open her lips to speak to him in order to make him turn so that she could satisfy the curiosity that had taken possession of her, her father's voice reached her.

"Jefford!" he called out.

Lisbeth got up and stood rigid, grasping the back of the chair upon which she had been sitting. She stared at Templin, and he saw that her eyes were alight with a great amazement.

"My God!" she breathed in an awed voice; "what does he mean? Jefford is n't here! Why, he has n't seen Jefford in years!"

"Who is Jefford?" Templin got up, aroused by the girl's manner.

"Jefford used to be father's secretary. He was more: he was a friend. But it has been years since he has seen Jefford!" She took several steps toward Templin and stared at him with widening eyes.

"You!" she gasped; "you are not Jefford?"

"I reckon not, "Templin replied gravely. "I 've got two names right now. Another would be a heap burdensome; I 'd never remember them. I reckon the Jefford he 's talkin' about must be in his mind."

Lisbeth gasped, stood silent as Stanton's voice again reached the veranda. This time he spoke peremptorily, impatiently:

"Jefford! I want to speak to you! Come here!"

Lisbeth closed her eyes and pressed her hands

over them. When she uncovered them they were alight with a great fear and dread. She looked inquiringly at Templin, who significantly touched his forehead and spoke regretfully:

"I reckon that tap on the head is doin' it."

He started toward the door, but Lisbeth reached it before him. It slammed in his face as she sped through the opening; and though he moved quickly he was only in time to see Lisbeth's skirts as she fled up the stairway.

When Templin reached the upper landing Lisbeth was in Stanton's room. He could hear her voice as she spoke lowly, soothingly to her father. It was apparent that she was assuring him that Jefford was not within call, for he answered stridently:

"Don't try to deceive me, Lisbeth. I 'm not a child, even though this weakness has come upon me. Jefford is here! He came yesterday! I tell you I want to speak with him. There is something I must tell him. I must! I must! Do you hear?"

"All right, father," came Lisbeth's voice, low, placative; "I 'll call him."

She emerged from the room, closed the door behind her, and came toward Templin, holding a finger tight-pressed over her lips.

"Templin," she said, whispering as she drew close; "his mind is wandering! He thinks you are

Jefford!" She leaned against the wall, vainly trying to suppress her agitation as she watched Templin with strange intentness. "You are Jefford!" she charged; "you must be!"

Templin shook his head negatively.

"Your dad 's got things mixed. I ain't Jefford. I never saw the man, never heard of him. My name 's Ned Templin. It always was except when I changed it to Lanning to fool the sheriff.

"It looks to me like your dad got hit harder than we thought. He 'll sure need a doctor to fix him up. There 's no sense of your hangin' on to any hope that I 'm Jefford. It looks to me like your dad is in bad shape. I 'll hustle right over to Cochise an' bring the doc back with me."

"Jefford," came Stanton's voice again, querulous, high-pitched, "what in thunder are you delaying for? What are you talking about. I don't want a doctor; I want you! Come in here!"

Templin hesitated, but Lisbeth seized him by an arm and pushed him toward the doorway.

"Go," she urged; "please go. Perhaps if you will talk with him for a while he will go to sleep!"

Templin entered Stanton's room. Lisbeth was close behind him. Stanton was lying on his back in bed. He was fully dressed, though; and when he saw Templin enter he got up, walked to a chair,

and stood with his hands resting on its back. He bore no visible sign of injury; he was as erect, as cool and imperturbable as he had been when in the same room the day before he had watched Templin from behind the barrel of a six-shooter.

"Come in, Jefford," he invited when he saw Templin. "I 'm mighty glad to see you. Too bad I was too ill yesterday to receive you."

Glancing at Lisbeth, Templin saw her shrink as if from a blow. Stanton evidently had no knowledge of what had happened to him. He had no recollection of the events of yesterday. His eyes were unnaturally bright and held a light of high intensity.

"Lisbeth," he said; "will you please retire. I have something very important to say to Jefford. And, remember, I do not wish to be interrupted."

Lisbeth backed toward the door. She had almost reached it when she dropped her handkerchief with which she had been surreptitiously dabbing at her eyes. Templin, standing close to her, reached down and recovered it. As he rose Lisbeth's lips were close to his ear.

"Humor him, Templin," she whispered. "Don't be cross with him—please!"

CHAPTER VIII

CONFESSION

EXCEPT that Stanton's eyes were extraordinarily bright and penetrating he was the same as when Templin had talked with him the day before. There was about him the same cold self-control, the same deliberation of manner, and the same calm assurance.

That was Templin's first impression. As Stanton faced him after the door had closed behind Lisbeth, Templin observed a change in the man since yesterday. His lips were pinched together; they were white, as if he were enduring much agony.

Templin thought the agony was mental. The same agony haunted his eyes; they were furtive, searching, tortured, reflecting, it seemed to Templin, a terrible anxiety and a stealthy eagerness. They lacked the clear directness of yesterday, the confidence, the sanity. They were the eyes of a man who visioned yesterday's ghosts, regrets.

Stanton motioned Templin to a chair and seated himself in the one upon whose back he had rested

his hands while Lisbeth had been in the room. Then he said:

"Jefford, where have you been keeping yourself all these years?"

Stanton was violently agitated. His lips were quivering; his fingers were working nervously; his eyes, gleaming and shifting, were eager; his gaze roved from Templin's lips to his eyes, to his forehead, his chin, his nose, incessantly probing, inquiring.

Templin soberly reflected upon Lisbeth's plea that he should humor Stanton. There seemed to be nothing else to do. For him to deny being the man Stanton thought him probably would arouse Stanton to a frenzy.

That, Templin supposed, was what Lisbeth anticipated and wished to avoid. At the same time he had no liking for the deception, and had he not considered Lisbeth's feelings he would have risked arousing Stanton.

"I 've just been roving around, Stanton," he answered.

"Jefford, I heard you had died."

"I don't seem to be dead, Stanton."

"You don't." A wan smile flitted over Stanton's lips. But there was no mirth in his eyes; they were still agonized, eager, fearful. "But you 've changed

Jefford. That is, in some ways. You 've got a quieter eye, some way. It used to be hard to catch your eyes, they were so confounded shifty. You 've discovered how to look a man straight in the eye. You 've got a better mouth, too; it 's firmer. Otherwise you 're the same Jefford. But you don't grow any older, Jefford. How is that?"

"I 've been taking care of myself, Stanton."

"Yes; that 's evident. I 've tried to. But it 's hell, the life I 've lived, Jefford. But I 've been sorry, Jefford—damned sorry! What are you doing out here? Why did you come?"

"Just drifted out."

"You 're a cowboy, Jefford. What brand are you riding for?"

"The Pig-Pen over on the Wolf," lied Templin.

A contempt for Stanton was growing in Templin. The man's present mental condition merely proved to him that one could not judge character with any degree of accuracy by a glance.

In Stanton's room yesterday Templin had been impressed by the man's quiet confidence in himself, by the steadiness of his eyes, which had seemed to indicate an iron self-control and courage of a rare sort. Stanton's mental derangement betrayed the coward in him, a strain which his sanity had concealed.

For Stanton was frightened by some hallucination that had seized him; his condition had exaggerated a memory that had tortured him in his normal state. He had always been afraid of the memory, but he had fought the fear. Now it was a naked thing, lying visible to any one who might look at the man.

Templin was not surprised when Stanton leaned toward him and said hoarsely:

"Jefford, he 's here! He 's here!"

"Who is here?" inquired Templin.

"Blaisdell!"

Stanton almost shrieked the name. It was as though he expected Templin to share his frenzy.

Templin was unmoved.

"Well, what of it?" he questioned. He thought that perhaps Stanton's sanity had momentarily returned, to give him a fleeting recollection of what had happened yesterday. But a swift glance into Stanton's eyes told him the man's reason was still dethroned.

"Jefford," he whispered. "Are n't you afraid of Blaisdell?" He seemed amazed, incredulous.

"I 'm not afraid of Blaisdell, Stanton."

"Good Lord! Not afraid! He says he 's not afraid of Blaisdell! Why, Jefford, Blaisdell would kill you if he knew you were here! He 'd kill you as quick as he 'd kill a rattlesnake;

as quick as he 'd kill me, if he got a chance! You 're not afraid of Blaisdell? Ha, ha, ha! Jefford, have you forgotten what we did to Blaisdell's wife and child?" He leaned forward and peered into Templin's eyes, searchingly. At last he drew back, wonderingly.

"By heaven, Jefford; I believe you have forgotten!" For an instant he leaned back in his chair, writhing, covering his eyes with his hands as though in an effort to blot some terrible recollection from his mind. He groaned, sobbed.

"Oh, God, Jefford; I wish I could forget! If I could only forget for just one minute! But I can't, Jefford; I can't, I tell you!"

He withdrew his hands from before his eyes and settled heavily in the chair, his shoulders drooping, his hands hanging at his sides, his chin on his chest.

A terrible weight rested upon Stanton's conscience. Templin was certain of that. It was equally certain that remorse was torturing the man. Perhaps the remorse and not Kelton's blow had deranged him.

It was not Templin's affair. His only conscious emotion, aside from his growing contempt of the man, was that of sympathy for Lisbeth. Stanton had evidently committed a dishonorable deed. Jef-

ford, his former secretary and friend—according to Lisbeth—had shared his guilt.

Templin would have left the room. He had no desire to listen to Stanton's raving; he did not care to hear more of his secret. He felt a certain pity for him, but his concern for Lisbeth was greater, overshadowing it. He wondered if Lisbeth knew her father's secret. He decided she did not, or, being aware that Stanton had mistaken him for Jefford, she would not have permitted him to be alone with Stanton.

"Stanton," he said quietly, "you 'd better go to sleep. I 'll send Miss Stanton in."

"Jefford, I don't want Lisbeth!" Stanton sat straight in the chair again, glaring wildly. "I don't want her, Jefford! I tell you I don't want her! If she knew what I did twenty years ago she 'd never speak to me again! She 'd leave me!"

He got up and paced the floor. His malady had transformed him. He was not the man who had faced Templin the day before. A dormant and craven trait of character now dominated him. The cold self-confidence of yesterday had been a mask, a veneer. Templin's pity was for what he saw now and was not for the man of yesterday.

Stanton ceased pacing the floor; he halted near Templin.

"Jefford," he said, "you 've forgotten. You say that. I think you are a liar. You 're trying to evade responsibility, now that you 've heard Blaisdell 's here. You can't do it, Jefford. I 'll remind you.

"You 're the man who suggested stealing Blaisdell's fortune. You engineered it. You sent Blaisdell on that European trip to get him away so that we could ruin him. You remember that, don't you?

"And you remember how Mrs. Blaisdell was found,. don't you—she and her daughter? Both dead! Too proud to beg or to ask you and me for aid! And Blaisdell in Europe on a secret mission, with his wife not knowing where to reach him.

"Ah, you fixed that, did n't you, Jefford? You were devilishly cunning. You knew that if Blaisdell heard what we were doing he 'd come back and kill both of us!

"Jefford, you know I was n't responsible for what happened to Blaisdell's wife. You told me you had provided for her. You juggled things around until you made me think that it was just a cunning business deal. Then you got your share and disappeared. You sneaked, Jefford, and left me to face Blaisdell!"

He shivered.

"Face Blaisdell!" he said. "God! After what

he found when he got home? He 'd have choked me to death! Face him!"

"Stanton, you 'd better lie down and get some sleep."

"Sleep!" His laugh was bitter. "Jefford, I have n't slept in a century. Yes, it 's that long since it happened. Longer! It 's been an eon or two—a dozen of them! Sleep!" He glared wildly around the room.

"Jefford, I can't get away from Blaisdell's wife. She follows me everywhere, she and her daughter. Those two chased me out of New York. They were everywhere.

"It got so that if I went to my club they 'd be standing somewhere near, watching me. When I 'd walk the streets they 'd be moving along beside me, or just behind me. Often I 'd turn and see them. They 'd be sitting opposite me when I 'd dine alone. They were with me at breakfast, at lunch; and when I 'd go to bed they 'd be in the room watching me.

"It would n't have been so bad if they 'd have said something, if they 'd have changed the expressions of their faces. But they were always the same. They 'd stare at me with their damned accusing eyes, stare at me like they were looking me through.

"It got to be unbearable, man! I couldn't get away from them. After a while I began to talk to

them. Then I got afraid of myself. I felt I had to get out of there, to go some place where they could n't find me.

"I sold out and went to Chicago. For a few days I did n't see them. And then one day when I was dining alone I saw them sitting across the table, staring at me. They did n't say anything; they just sat and looked at me. How they ever found out where I was I don't know. But there they were.

"I left my dinner half finished and went out into the streets. I walked around for several hours with them tagging at my heels. Both of them stood at the foot of my bed that night and looked at me. I 'd go to sleep, but when I 'd wake up they 'd still be standing there.

"They were there in the morning. I cursed them, and they left. I got out of Chicago. Went to a little town in Ohio. They followed me there. I jumped from one place to another.

"Sometimes it would seem I had escaped them, but after a while they 'd turn up again, to stand near and stare at me. They never bothered me when Lisbeth was around. That is, not until lately.

"But they 've hung on. I don't know what they want, for they won't talk. Jefford, they were in this room all last night, standing at the foot of my bed

looking at me. The other day, riding home from Wilcox, they walked along beside my horse.

"I asked Blaisdell's wife what she wanted. She did n't answer. I asked her again, and I told her her place was with her husband, who was in the country. She did n't say anything; she just walked along, looking at me.

"Jefford, I know they are not real people, though there 's times when I think so. Then I 'll talk to them. That 's a bad sign, Jefford. If they keep it up I 'll go insane.

"I know that; I 'm not a fool. A man can't keep on running away from people like that, arguing with them and having them close to him all the time. A man has got to have some sleep.

"Do you know why I called this place Last Hope? Because when I bought it I decided that if they followed me here there 'd be no use of going any further. I 'd have to kill myself to get rid of them, and that is what I intended to do.

"But I have n't had the nerve. I 'm still here. When I heard that Blaisdell was in the country, I got an idea that his wife had come out here looking for him, and I decided that if I could kill Blaisdell his wife would go away.

"But I was as much afraid of Blaisdell as I am of

his wife. I could n't face him. I have heard he is around, but I have n't seen him. I had to give up that notion.

"Then I got the idea that if I killed Blaisdell's men maybe Blaisdell would get disgusted and leave the country, taking his wife and daughter with him.

"I 've killed two or three of Blaisdell's men out in the desert. I killed two more the other day, over in Wilcox. I told Lisbeth I was going to Lazette to hire some men, but after I rode the Lazette trail for a time I switched off and went to Wilcox.

"One of Blaisdell's men that I killed did n't die right away. I did some things for him, and he had told me that two of Blaisdell's men were in Wilcox posing as decent citizens. They were Jeff Barkwell and Ernie Putt. I met them in front of Cheever's store and killed them both."

Stanton laughed lowly.

"Funny thing about that deal," he added. "A man named Templin got blamed for the killing. His horse was standing in front of Cheever's. I did n't know then that it was Templin's horse. I found that out later, when he rode him into my corral.

"I 'd sneaked into Wilcox after dark. I left my horse at the edge of town, in a grove of juniper-trees. I met Barkwell and Putt in front of Cheever's and

downed them. It was easy. For years I 've been practising with a six-shooter, expecting to kill Blaisdell if I met him.

"I 'd trailed Barkwell and Putt for two hours, trying to get them alone. I thought I 'd got them safely, but after I killed them I saw a man standing down the street a little ways. He 'd seen me.

"I had to get away quick, so I took a roan horse that was hitched to the rack in front of the store. I rode the roan to the juniper-grove where I got my own horse. I 'd lamed the roan someway, or maybe I 'd kept him; he was a mighty good horse.

"I was riding away when I saw a man running toward me from town. I don't know who it was. Maybe it was the man who 'd seen me shoot Barkwell and Putt; maybe it was Templin. I did n't wait to see, and I 'm certain he did n't get close enough to be able to identify me if he 'd see me again.

"I rode back the way I had come, swinging around again to the Lazette trail. After I got to the trail I took my time. I figured that if the man who saw me kill Barkwell and Putt was n't the owner of the roan horse, the owner of the roan would be blamed for the murders.

"When I got home I found Templin had come. At first I was afraid he 'd come for me. I did n't

know him until then; I 'd never seen him. But I 'd heard of him, heard he was an outlaw and that he ran with Blaisdell.

"But he 'd done something for my daughter. I did n't want to kill him, though I went up-stairs for that purpose. After I 'd seen him I did n't have the heart to kill him. He was too cool and quiet.

"I questioned Norton about Templin. It seems the man who had seen me kill Barkwell and Putt had mistaken me for Templin. The man, a fellow named King, had seen Templin in town earlier, riding the roan horse. When he saw me mount the roan he thought I was Templin. Templin had to light out, on a lamed horse.

"The sheriff's posse was close behind him. Templin would n't run any more. He 'd made my daughter cut his hair. He 'd shaved. He dressed himself in some of my clothes and passed himself off as an Easterner, visiting us. He called himself Lawrence Lanning. He got away with it.

"Then some of Blaisdell's Riders came. That 's all I remember. It 's queer. Something must have happened."

Stanton paused and brushed a hand over his forehead as though in an effort to refresh his memory.

"Strange," he added, staring vacuously at Tem-

plin; "I don't seem to remember anything further. Jefford, I think I 'm going insane. Something is going to happen to me; things are so jumbled I can't figure them out.

"But I want you to promise me one thing, Jefford, that you 'll find Templin and tell him to take care of Lisbeth. Templin 's an outlaw, but he 's human, and he 's got a heart. I 'd rather trust him than a good many men who have better reputations.

"I 'd trust him before I 'd trust you, Jefford. Why, damn your hide, Jefford, I can't trust you at all! You 're dead! You died years ago! I know it! You can't fool me! You 've come here to devil me, just like Blaisdell's wife and daughter!

"Get out of here! And take those damned women with you! Do you hear? I won't have you around; I won't—"

"Steady, Stanton," said Templin. He stepped forward as Stanton swayed and toppled limply forward, caught him in his arms lifted him from the floor, and carried him to the bed. He stood for an instant looking down into Stanton's face, disgust gripping him.

Then he moved softly to the door, opened it, and let himself into the hall. Closing the door, he stood with a hand on the knob.

"Damn your miserable hide, Stanton, you ought to suffer!" he declared, aloud.

He turned at the sound of a footstep behind him and saw Lisbeth at the farther end of the hall, coming toward him.

CHAPTER IX

A WHITE LIE

TEMPLIN did not know if Lisbeth had heard him. If she did she gave no sign. There was no reproach in her eyes, no astonishment, no resentment. If another emotion except anxiety was expressed there, he could not see it. He saw only the anxiety and was thankful. He had forgotten Lisbeth for the moment.

Her face was very pale, her lips were tight-pressed, as she came quickly toward Templin and stood at last, looking straight at him.

"He's in pretty bad shape," said Templin, answering the inquiry in her eyes. "He raved pretty much, thinkin' I was Jefford. He 's asleep now. That bump on the head seems to have set him off his mind. If you 're not afraid to stay here alone to take care of him I 'll go to Cochise for the doctor."

"I 'm not afraid," she said. She looked at the door of Stanton's room and seemed to be meditating. "Yes," she added, after an interval of silence; "I suppose that will be best. But you can't go without

breakfast. If you will wait a few minutes I will get something ready for you."

"Well," he smiled, "I reckon breakfast would help. While you 're gettin' it I 'll rope a horse."

He would have moved past her to go to the stairs, but she stepped in front of him. A queer calmness seemed to have settled over her.

Templin felt that she had conquered her anxiety and the excitement that had been so evident in her manner when she had run up the stairs ahead of him some time before; it seemed to him that she had determined to control herself. If that were so, she had succeeded.

As she stood in front of him she appeared to be studying him, appraising him. Her gaze never left his eyes, and he was certain that in the depths of hers was a confidence that he had not seen before when she had looked at him.

Her voice was very low.

"Templin," she said, "what did father say to you?"

"His talk did n't amount to much."

"But he said something?"

"Sure. He raved. What he said was n't important."

"He thought you were Jefford?"

"Yes; he thought that. Queer, was n't it? I 've been wonderin' if I look like Jefford."

"I presume you must. At least slightly." Her lips were closed tightly as she held his gaze, and the confidence that Templin had noticed seemed to grow in the depths of her eyes. Her color was coming back. As Templin watched her, wondering at her insistence, a faint crimson stained her cheeks. "What did he say to you, Templin?" she added.

"Why, I don't remember. I thought he was just ravin', an' I did n't pay any attention to him."

"You must have heard something, Templin, something that you remember."

"I remember him callin' me Jefford."

"Is that all? Are you sure, Templin?"

"Pretty sure."

Her gaze did not waver.

"Templin," she said, "do you ever speak your thoughts aloud when you think there is no one around?"

"I reckon not. At least I 've never caught myself doin' it."

"What were you saying when you closed the door to father's room, just a minute ago?"

"You heard that?" he asked, a slow color surging into his cheeks.

"I heard you swearing, Templin. You said some one ought to suffer."

"Referrin' to myself," he lied, brazenly meeting the doubt in her eyes. "I 'd pinched my finger in the door while shuttin' it."

"Did that cause you much suffering, Templin?"

"It hurt like blazes."

"Templin, you mentioned some one's 'miserable hide.' What did you mean by that?"

"Meanin' my finger. Ma'am, it hurt like the very devil. I was sure feelin' mean as a coyote. But if you don't like my cussin' I 'll stop it."

For an instant more she looked at him; then her eyes glowed strangely, the color grew in her cheeks, and she stepped aside to permit him to pass.

"All right, Templin," she said; "please stop cussin'; I don't like it." She went on a little distance, down the hall toward the stairs, but halted and looked back over her shoulder.

"Templin," she said steadily, "if your finger gets to hurting much come to me. I 'll see what I can do for it."

Out in the corral a few minutes later Templin wore a puzzled frown. Trailing from his right hand was his rope, which he had removed from the saddle he had hidden in the stable.

"One thing is mighty certain," he told himself. "She don't believe half of what I told her. That was sure a slim one, me tellin' her Stanton had n't said nothing that I remembered. She must think I 've got a poor memory or that I 'm a powerful conscienceless liar."

He gazed at the index-finger of his left hand. "I 'd make it the right hand if I was sure I would n't need it. But it 's a heap certain. One finger has to be sacrificed in the interests of truth."

He walked to the corral fence, stuck his finger between a joint where the ends of two rails met, laid the finger on one rail, lifted the upper one, and jammed it hard upon the finger. He grimaced with pain as he withdrew the injured finger and examined it.

"That keeps me among the saints," was his thought. "When I show her that she 'll be sorry she doubted me."

He showed her the finger when he went into the house after she had come to the door and called him. He succeeded in getting counterfeit reproach into his eyes as he watched her when she examined the finger.

"It 's mashed pretty bad, I reckon," he told her. "An' all the time you was thinkin' I was lyin' to you."

"I 'm sorry, Templin," she sympathized as she bound it up. "You ought to be more careful when you are closing a door."

He did not look at the finger as she worked with it; his gaze was upon the back of her neck, where the hair billowed out to twine into the wonderful mass above.

"Hell!" he mused. "Let Blaisdell's gang get their hands on a girl like that? I reckon not! Let her know that her father is a miserable coyote? Not so 's you could notice! If I thought he 'd repeat that ravin' while I 'm gone to Cochise I 'd fan it right up-stairs an' muzzle him!"

But he did not carry out the threat. After he had breakfasted and saddled a big black horse, he stood for an instant at the edge of the veranda, looking at Lisbeth.

"You 'll find my rifle in the living-room," he said. "It 's loaded an' it 's got a hair-trigger. It shoots true. I don't reckon you 'll be bothered by any of Blaisdell's gang before I get back. But if you are bothered, or if any other bad *hombre* comes monkeyin' around here, it 'd be a pretty good idea to shoot him first an' do your inquirin' after.

"I 'll try to have the doc come a-rushin'. I would n't bother your dad none. The best way to treat a man like him—in his condition, I mean—

is to lock the doors an' do a lot of stayin' away from him. He 'll get along a heap better that way."

He rode eastward, hoping that his warning would keep Lisbeth from her parent, thus lessening the probability of her discovering his shameful past.

But the warning was wasted. Lisbeth had been standing close to the door of her father's room all the time Templin had been within. She had heard every word uttered by the two. And she had been standing at a kitchen window when Templin had crushed his finger between the rails of the corral fence.

She sat on the veranda as he rode away. Her gaze followed him as he rode into the desert haze; she watched him until he was a mere dot in her vision. And then for hours she sat on the veranda miserably recalling what she had heard.

There in the hallway she had tried Templin. She had given him every chance to repeat to her the story of her father's shame. More: she had attempted to force him to repeat it; she had tried to coax the story out of him.

Stanton had killed Barkwell and Putt. Templin was innocent. And yet he had taken the blame; he meant to continue to take it. She had hated him, had despised him. And yet he was sacrificing himself for her.

God's ways were inexplicable. One man—her father—seemed a model of virtue and integrity. In reality he was a sinner of the worst type, for he had preyed upon the widow and the orphan. Outwardly Templin was an outlaw. Yet he had sturdy principles, courage to sacrifice himself for others.

Others! She knew, of course. In a way she had known from the instant she had seen Templin sitting on his horse near the veranda, before he had chastised Philippe Mendezo.

CHAPTER X

SILENCE IS SAFER

TEMPLIN, also, was soberly moralizing. As he rode into the white, shimmering sunlight that blazed fairly in his face he knew what had happened to him. He knew what motive had impelled him to keep silent regarding what Stanton had said to him; he knew why he had lied about his finger, why he had crushed it between the rails of the corral fence.

Also, he was aware of his regret over having to leave Lisbeth alone. He was certain that Blaisdell would not come during his absence, and therefore his regret was not aroused over a conviction that he had left the girl exposed to danger. His feeling was more poignant than that.

He was not worried about Lisbeth; he felt she would not be bothered. His regret was that he had to leave when he did n't want to. He was impatient at being away from Lisbeth, and he knew the reason.

And yet he had no hope of ever arousing Lisbeth's interest.

"It ain't reasonable," he told himself as he rode. "I 'd be a fool to get to hopin'."

Any earnestness he might feel with regard to the girl who had so completely enthralled him would be presumption. He had n't lived right; he did n't deserve her; he had no right even to think of her in that manner.

But he could n't help thinking, of course, and as long as he kept his thinking to himself he would not offend her. He did n't want to do that. She was offended already, by his presence at the Last Hope, by his determination to stay there despite her protests.

He fell to summing up his past life, unconsciously trying to make it as blameless as he could so that his character would not seem so black to him.

"Stealin' cattle," he ruminated. "Well, that 's a crime, an' I 've done a lot of it. But there 's guys who think that as long as there 's no law—no regular law—governin' cattle, a man 's got a right to take what he can find. Findin' them."

He gravely considered the word. "Well, findin' them sounds all right, an' mebbe she would n't notice. But if she 'd happen to think that mebbe I 'd found them where they was n't lost, she 'd look at it different. Yes, it 's different. Any damn fool

would know that. An' she 's far from bein' a fool. I reckon I 'm lost on that count."

However, his thoughts persisted in that channel. Concede cattle-rustling to be a crime. All right; he was a criminal. Yet he could name well-known men who were as guilty as he. He could name others who did worse and who had never been apprehended.

The crime, as he saw it, was in getting caught. As long as a man evaded capture or did n't become notoriously identified as a thief, he could continue to hold his head up. A case in point was Stanton. He did n't bring him in for the purpose of contrast with himself, but just because the scene with Stanton was fresh in his mind.

Yet Stanton's case did n't seem to fit; it did not parallel his own. Stanton had concealed his crimes; he had n't concealed his own; he could n't have concealed them if he had wanted to. He had been in the wrong profession, he ironically told himself; he should have chosen another, a more genteel one.

Well, he could n't change what had already happened; the thing to do was to make the best of a bad life. He could live down his reputation, he supposed, but in order to do so he would have to leave

the country. But he 'd not do that; he meant to stay right here—for a time, at least.

"There 's no use in moanin'," was his philosophical conclusion. "A man 's got to play his string out standin' up straight an' facin' the music, or he ain't no man."

A four-hour ride brought him to the foot of a low, black mountain from which he could see Cochise. The town's dozen buildings were sprawled in two parallel lines with a rambling corral between them.

It was midday, and the sun beat down upon Cochise with terrific intensity. There seemed to be no life in the place. At least no human being was visible as Templin rode to a hitching-rack in front of a store and dismounted. He stood for a few moments watching the black horse, which was nosing aside some green slime in a water-trough at the hitching-post, trying to get at the stale water beneath.

"You won't find that very refreshin'," Templin told the animal. "But in this country you 've got to take what you can get. That applies to doctors, too. Personally, I would n't trust Doc Meeder to cure a bellyache. He 's got more mouth than sense. A man has got to be pretty rugged to survive Doc Meeder's talkin'."

Yet he was not immediately to secure the services of the man he had defamed. Inquiry here and there developed the information that Dr. Meeder had gone to Wilcox the day before. The doctor had let it be known that he had been called to attend a "bad case."

"Jimjams, I reckon," mused Templin as he again stood at the hitching-rack. "If the man's unconscious Meeder will pull him through. Otherwise he 'll he talked to death."

Wilcox! Going to Wilcox meant a clash with the sheriff. Templin stared into the inferno of heat that stretched toward the other town.

He had hoped that he might avoid Wilcox.

"But I reckon there 's no use bein' bashful, though it seems mighty ridiculous runnin' into a fight in order to send a man like Meeder to a man like Stanton. She don't know Meeder, though, any more than she knows her dad, an' she 'd think I had n't tried."

He headed the black horse toward Wilcox. The trail ran straight through the valley. Mountain-ranges on both sides shut off the vagrant breezes; the sun poured its blighting heat straight down.

The black horse loped steadily. After an hour's ride the base of a mountain seemed to wheel around, and there, its few buildings basking in the sun, was Wilcox, a replica of Cochise.

Templin rode to the hitching-rail in front of Cheever's store, where Putt and Barkwell had been killed, and where he had hitched the roan horse that Stanton had ridden away after the shooting.

Rounding the base of the mountain back in the valley, Templin had critically examined his six-shooter. The butt of the weapon was visible as he dismounted, for he had buckled back the flap so that there would be no delay when he wanted to use the weapon.

Yet he wished to avoid meeting Sheriff Norton. In the days before he had gone to the Last Hope he would have welcomed a clash with the sheriff, merely because of his dislike for the law and all the law's representatives.

He found now that he was reluctant to meet Norton. He could n't understand the feeling, but he obeyed it and slipped quietly into the doorway of a store next to Cheever's.

There he inquired about Dr. Meeder.

"Yes, he 's here," said the storekeeper. "He 's down to Ed Kunneen's place. Ed's wife 's been mighty sick, but I reckon she 'll pull through."

Kunneen's "place" was a blacksmith shop. His living-rooms were in the rear of the building. Templin went in the front way. The forge was

glowing; Kunneen himself was working at the anvil. He grinned hugely at Templin, whereat Templin divined that things were going all right with Mrs. Kunneen.

"The doc? Shore. He 's in thar. He 's gettin' ready to slope. Go right in an' you 'll ketch him."

Templin pushed open a door and found himself in the Kunneen living-room. Mrs. Kunneen, pale and wan, but smiling, and sitting up in bed, nodded to him.

Dr. Meeder, a ponderous, heavy-featured man with a bulbous nose which was stained an undesirable crimson, was leaning over a chair snapping the lock of a medicine-case. He stared inquiringly at Templin. He had seen him before but was not certain he knew him.

"Hello," he said gruffly.

"Got another case for you, doc," said Templin. He smiled at the sick woman, and his voice grew gentle.

"Don't need the doc any more, I reckon," he said. "If your looks ain't deceivin', you 'll be takin' nourishment in big doses pretty quick."

"Oh!" smiled the woman. "I 'm awfully hungry right now! But the doctor won't let me eat. Is n't he mean?"

"A man that will keep grub away from a hungry woman sure ain't got much principle," grinned Templin.

Dr. Meeder cleared his throat pompously.

"H-m! Mr. Man, please don't excite the patient. I 've had a terrible time with her; a terrible time, sir! I would n't have given three cents for her life when I got here. But I pulled her through, sir; I pulled her through. It took work, though, mighty hard work. A bad case, sir, a very bad case. There was a time when I thought my remedies would not take hold. A very stubborn malady. But I finally mastered it. She 's out of danger now, though, if—if she don't go to stuffing herself." He glared at his patient.

"We all eat too much, sir," he went on. "We all eat a lot too much. I knew a fellow over at Dry Lake who used to eat a peck at a meal. A peck, sir—"

"I reckon your man did n't live at a boardin'-house, doc?" questioned Templin.

"No, sir!" glared the professional man. "This man I am speaking about was the head of a family, sir. He 'd got into the habit of eating large amounts of food—"

"My reason for inquirin' was that I 've heard that since folks have taken to eatin' so much

boardin'-house keepers have been dolin' out the grub with a yardstick an' chargin' by the inch. Seems to me that 's a heap simple. If a man eats a yard he don't get charged as much as the man who eats two yards or even a yard and a half. In that way—"

"Where is the patient you refer to?" gruffly interrupted the doctor. His face grew red; he puffed out his cheeks. "There is too much levity in this world, sir!" he reproved; "far too much. The habits of this generation are abominable. Nobody is serious any more. There 's too much—"

"Your new patient is at the Last Hope, doc," interrupted Templin. "He 's mighty sick. If you could manage to hobble your jaw we might manage to get to the Last Hope in time to do somethin' for him."

"Sir, I refuse to answer a call when I am notified in this manner!" blustered the doctor. "When people imagine a professional man is to be—"

"You 'll answer this call, doc," said Templin.

His voice was low. Dr. Meeder was indignant, and he meant to refuse. But something in the quiet, steady eyes that met his seemed to convince him of the foolhardiness of refusing.

He rubbed his nose. "Of course," he said. "I meant to answer it all the time. I was merely

registering my disapproval of your methods, sir. I will go with you right away. But first I shall call upon my friend Cheever."

"We 'll both go," quickly said Templin. "I 'm wantin' a drink myself."

He smiled at the sick woman as he followed the doctor out the rear door. The doctor's horse was hitched near the door of a stable. The animal was saddled and bridled.

Templin was right behind the doctor when the latter entered the rear door of Cheever's place. The door opened into a small bar-room. Templin drank sparingly; the doctor poured himself a generous drink. He talked sonorously with the bartender, helped himself to another drink. He refused to notice the impatient glances of Templin. But in fifteen minutes he had enough.

Templin moved away from the bar, following Meeder.

He had not taken more than half a dozen steps when he observed that the faces of men who had been lounging about the room were all turned toward the front entrance to the bar-room. The faces were tense, expectant. It was as if the men saw something that had startled them.

Templin's first thought was that Sheriff Norton was in the room, behind him, at the front entrance,

waiting for him to turn. He halted, keeping his back to the front while he considered his predicament.

If Norton was behind him and had recognized him, there was no doubt about the sheriff having his gun out. He did n't want to kill the sheriff. He was innocent of the slaying of Putt and Barkwell, and there was no need of his murdering the sheriff merely because the man was doing what he thought was his duty.

Also, with his back turned, he did n't have much chance. If he made a hostile movement Norton would shoot. Besides, even if he did succeed in killing Norton, he felt he would never get out of the room alive.

He saw several of the watching men glance at him. Dr. Meeder had halted and was looking intently at him, his eyes distended, startled.

Templin grinned at the doctor.

"I reckon we 'll have one more before we go, doc," he said.

It seemed to him that he heard lungs sighing in process of deflation. The crisis that seemed to impend had been postponed. He caught Meeder slowly closing one eye at him, and his own lashes flickered a reply. Then he moved slowly toward the bar, Meeder with him.

The bartender watched him curiously as he poured a drink. It seemed the aproned servitor was marveling at the steadiness of his hand. Apparently Templin was unconcerned. That, or he was ignorant of the menace behind him.

He lifted his glass, drank. As he did so he glanced into the mirror behind the bar. He set the glass down, tossed a coin to the bartender.

He had seen the menace at the front door. It was Tolver, a member of Blaisdell's band. Tolver, he was certain, had been sent by Blaisdell. The edict had gone forth; Tolver meant to kill him.

There was no gun in Tolver's hand, and yet there was a threat in his attitude. He was leaning a little forward, his body in a crouch, his legs slightly a-sprawl. He had recognized Templin from behind; he meant to shoot. The loungers in the barroom had interpreted his intention.

And yet Tolver knew he could not kill Templin without seeming to have provocation, or unless Templin appeared to make the first hostile movement. This was a public place, and there were witnesses.

As Templin tossed the coin to the bartender Tolver spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Templin!" he called.

Templin did not turn; he apparently paid no attention to the voice. If he answered the call every man in the room would know he was Templin; and Norton might be near.

"Damn you, Templin, turn around hyar!" commanded Tolver.

Templin turned slowly. Apparently he was merely curious to see who was so insistently calling. He seemed puzzled as he looked at Tolver.

Tolver's hand shot downward—paused. For an instant he, too, was puzzled. He had recognized Templin's figure, the black-handled guns.

For an instant it seemed he was convinced he had made a mistake, for he stared at Templin's face which was shaved smooth; at his hair, cleverly cut. Too late his hand gripped the gun at his hip. Despair and rage glinted his eyes as he realized that his slight pause had robbed him of his advantage.

Desperately he jerked at his gun. It went off, the bullet tearing into the floor as Templin's heavy weapon crashed.

Tolver staggered, struck the wall behind him, stood there for an instant groping with his hands in an effort to keep himself from falling. Then he stared around the room as though vastly ashamed and embarrassed. He looked at Templin, sneered,

and fell, sliding down the wall in a sitting posture, and then toppling over until he lay face down on the floor.

Templin walked to him, stood over him.

Tolver was motionless. The fingers of one hand moved jerkily and then were still. Men stood where they had been when Tolver had entered the room. No one moved or spoke until a sound came from the store-room in front, and a deep voice called out:

"Everybody stand! Don't move an inch or I 'll bore you! Bill, get the sheriff. He 's across the street in front of McDonald's."

"That 's Cheever!" whispered a man who stood well to the rear of the bar-room. "Ten to one he 's got that there rifle of his'n coverin' the whole bunch."

After an interval heavy steps were heard in the store-room. And Cheever's voice, directing the new-comer. Then Sheriff Norton appeared in the doorway.

The sheriff's face was red; his eyes were bright and excited. When he observed the body of the tall man on the floor, and Templin standing where he had stood when the shooting had taken place, his six-shooter still in hand, Norton's lips tightened.

"Put thet gun away, thar—you!" he ordered, speaking to Templin. He watched him sheath the

weapon; then he stepped to the tall man and peered at his face.

"Tolver," he said shortly. "Wa-al, thar ain't much loss. I reckon it 's pretty well known Tolver was one of Blaisdell's gang. It 'd save me trouble if thar 'd be more of 'em go like this one has gone. But thet ain't got nothin' to do with the law's side of it."

Norton walked close to Templin.

"Stranger," he said, "you 've killed Tolver. Thar 's always two sides to a story. What 's yore side?"

"I 'd just taken a drink with Dr. Meeder, sheriff. I was taking him to see a patient. We were going out when I heard Tolver call. When I turned he was dragging his gun out. I had to shoot him."

"Wa-al, I reckon you done so," drawled Norton. "Thet talk of yourn about hevin' a drink with Doc Meeder sounds straight. The doc 's always takin' a drink, it seems. But who 's the patient you was takin' the doc to?"

"Stanton—over at the Last Hope," answered Templin.

"Stanton, eh?" Norton looked searchingly at Templin.

"Stanton, eh?" he repeated, this time more slowly. "Hell!" he added suddenly. "Ain't you thet thar

tenderfoot which was settin' on Stanton's porch yesterday, when I was over thar lookin' for Ned Templin?"

"I was there yesterday," admitted Templin. "I talked with you."

"Yes," grimaced Norton, "you talked. Said yore name was Lanning, did n't you?"

Templin nodded.

"How 's it come Cheever says he heard this man Tolver call you Templin before you shot him?"

"Tolver might have been mistaken, sheriff. Perhaps I may even resemble Mr. Templin."

"Wa-al," said the sheriff, "mebbe you do. You shore do shoot a heap like him, from all accounts. You jest shet yore trap for a second. Boys," he said, looking at the other men in the room, "some of you must hev seen this shootin'. Who started it?"

"I reckon Tolver meant to down this here guy," said a man. "But he did n't seem to get started soon enough."

"Jim," said the sheriff, "thet sounds fishy. Tolver was a slick hand with a gun."

"There 's slicker," drawled Jim. He looked at Templin.

"Carter, what you got to say?"

"Tolver come in hyar lookin' for trouble. I reckon he got it."

"Kane, did you see the shootin'?"

"Uhuh. Tolver meant business. He started it. I never seen a man look so surprised."

"Cheever, what you got to say?"

The storekeeper had entered through the front door. He was a short man, ruddy, powerful. In his hand was a rifle.

"Tolver come in. I was behind the counter. He didn't say anything to me. He come to the door here. I heard him call, 'Templin.' Then I heard two shots. I looked in, saw Tolver on the floor. The stranger was standin' over him. I covered the stranger with my rifle an' sent Bill to call you. That 's all I know about it."

Norton again turned to Templin.

"Lanning," he said slowly, "it appears these hyar boys think you shot Tolver in self-defense. As thar ain't no one said a word for Tolver, it appears you 're cleared on one count.

"But thar 's another thing. Tolver 's raised an issue hyar. He 's said yore name is Templin. You know what we 've got ag'in Templin. I reckon you 've got to bring forward proof which will show you ain't Templin.

"Shore, I know yore name was Lanning when you was talkin' to me at the Last Hope. But thet don't prove thet 's yore name. How long have you been in this country?"

"Two weeks."

"Two weeks, eh?" said the sheriff doubtfully. "Whar did you learn to shoot like that?"

"Picked it up back home, I presume."

"Whar 's yore home, Lanning?"

"Norton, you are too curious. What difference does it make where I came from? I 'm here. I 'm Stanton's guest. I come in here with Dr. Meeder, and a man tries to shoot me. I shoot him before he can get going. It seems to me that your only concern should be to discover who was the aggressor."

"Shore, I reckon yore Lanning, all right," grimly said Norton, "because yore just as fresh as when you was talkin' to me on Stanton's porch. But thar 's a doubt hyar, an' it 's got to be cleared up. Tolver claimed you was Templin. If yore Templin you killed Putt an' Barkwell, an' I 've got to take you in an' hold you till you prove otherwise."

"Norton, you told me you 'd never seen Templin."

"Thet 's right," admitted the sheriff.

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed a man. "I reckon he 's got you there, Norton. That 's a mighty weak

excuse to hold a man on—because Tolver called out, 'Templin.' Mebbe Tolver meant to say somethin' else. Mebbe he did n't mean this here guy was Templin at all. Seems that while everybody in this country has heard of Templin, there ain't nobody on speakin' acquaintance with him."

"Kane, you shet up. I 'm runnin' the law in this county. I 'm responsible, an' I 'm goin' to hold this man till I know whar I 'm at. You 've got the most to say, Kane. Suppose you hunt up Ed King an' bring him hyar. He saw the shootin' of Putt an' Barkwell, an' I reckon he 'll be able to identify the man who killed 'em."

Kane went out. Dr. Meeder moved to the bar. At a nod from Templin the other men in the room, including the sheriff, joined the physician.

Then Ed King came in, accompanied by Kane. Apparently Kane had confided in King, for, after a swift glance at the prostrate Tolver, King's eyes sought Norton, his gaze expressing astonishment and inquiry.

"Hev a drink, Ed," invited the sheriff.

King drank, set his glass down, looked at Norton.

"Ed," said the sheriff, "you claim to hev seen Putt an' Barkwell killed. You said Templin done it." He pointed to Templin. "Take a good look at that man an' tell me if you ever saw him before."

King stepped away from the bar, looked searchingly at Templin.

"Norton," he said finally, "what 's up? I never seen this here man before. I reckon nobody else has. He looks like a cross between an Eastern dude an' a South Texas horse-wrangler."

"He beat Tolver to the draw, Ed," gently said the sheriff.

"Shucks, you don't say?"

King stepped back a little, surveyed Templin again from head to foot.

"He beat Tolver, eh?" he said. "Well, now, that don't seem possible!"

"Wa-al, that 's Tolver. The boys seen the shootin'. Ed, thar ain't many men in this section of the country could hev beat Tolver thet way. Blaisdell, mebbe—much as I 've heard—an' Ned Templin. Ed, hev you ever seen Ned Templin?"

"Not to my knowin'."

"Ed, you saw a man down Putt an' Barkwell. Does this hyar man look like the man thet done it?"

"Hell, no!" positively declared King. "This here man 's about the size of the guy which plugged them boys. But this guy 's got red hair mostly. The guy which done the shootin' had white hair. Norton, there ain't no resemblance besides their size. This here man ain't the one!"

"Ed," persisted Norton, "it seems yore some mixed up. You said Templin shot Putt an' Barkwell. If you don't know Templin, how c'n you say he done it?"

"Norton, the guy that done the shootin' drawed his gun like folks say Templin draws his'n. If this guy is Templin he did n't shoot Putt an' Barkwell. I 'm sure certain of that."

"Wa-al," reluctantly said Norton, "I reckon thar ain't nothin' more to be said. Except this." He now stared with some belligerence at Templin. "Yore name may be Lanning, all right; an' mebbe you come from Bosting or some such place. But thar 's this much: you never learned to sling a gun like thet no place in the East.

"I 'm lettin' you go back to the Last Hope. But I 'll expect you to stay thar for a few days, till I find out who rode thet roan horse!"

"I 'm staying, sheriff."

Reluctant admiration glinted Norton's eyes.

"Shore, you 'll stay," he said. "I 'd bet a round of drinks on thet. I 'd shore like to see you hev a run-in with Templin. Thar would be gun-play which would make a man's hair stand right up!"

Subdued laughter followed Templin and the doctor out of the rear door. They mounted their horses.

Not until they had ridden more than a mile did either of the riders speak. Then Meeder laughed.

"That was plumb slick shooting, Templin," he said.

"Tolver never was any good with a gun, doc," returned Templin. "He had one big fault."

"What was that, Templin?" queried the physician, interested.

"He talked too much, doc. If he had n't stopped to call me by my name, he 'd have had a chance."

"Meaning?"

"Just what I said, doc. Folks that don't wear governors on their mouths are always sayin' more than they ought to say. They are rushin' in, shootin' off their gab before their brains start workin'.

"You knowed me right away, there in Kunneen's place. You kept quiet about knowin' me until now, which was right sensible an' cautious. Where you 're goin' there is a man who will mebbe talk too much. Doctors ain't supposed to have any memories.

"If you 're as sensible as you was while we was in Cheever's place, you 'll not hear anything Stanton says. Am I makin' myself clear?"

"Perfectly," replied Meeder.

"An', doc."

"Yes."

"Stanton's daughter will be with him. If Stanton starts to ravin' in her presence you 'll have to muzzle him."

"Why—"

"You 're hearin' me, doc?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER XI

THE QUIRT WAS NOT ENOUGH

TOLVER, the man Templin had killed in the bar-room behind Cheever's store, had been a member of Blaisdell's band. Templin had recognized Tolver's voice and had known what the calling of his name portended. Twice Templin's skilled hand and active brain had saved him. Twice had men attempted to obey Blaisdell's edict. Blaisdell would continue to seek his life. Blaisdell was ruthless, relentless.

Tolver and Kelton had been clever gun-fighters. There were none better in the outlaw band except Blaisdell himself. Blaisdell, arrogant, domineering, cynical, merciless, was a wizard with a six-shooter. Even Tolver and Kelton, clever gunmen as they had been, had feared him. Blaisdell's skill, vindicated in his many gun-fights with members of his band and with others, had impressed Tolver and Kelton—had awed them.

Blaisdell had never crossed Templin. Blaisdell had had a provoking and irritating habit of watch-

ing Templin, of studying him. It was as though at a future date he contemplated testing Templin's draw and was seeking to discover some characteristic movement which would help him to beat the other when the time came.

Nor had Blaisdell been in any hurry. His attitude toward Templin had always been one of cold courtesy, of flattering deference. He had never quarreled, had never lost his patience with Templin as with most of the men of his band. Not even when they had parted had Blaisdell lost his temper.

But Blaisdell was active; there could be no doubt of that. He had sent Kelton and Tolver to kill Templin; he would send others.

Yet Templin was determined to stay on at the Last Hope. Now that he knew the reason for Blaisdell's sending of Kelton, Stagg, and Givins to the ranch, he was convinced that the outlaw chief would not desist until he was revenged upon Stanton. Stanton was doomed; he could not escape. Templin knew Blaisdell's methods; he felt certain that every trail out of the country was carefully guarded against Stanton's escape.

Blaisdell's first aggressive movement had been against Stanton's daughter. He had meant to strike the father through the girl. Perhaps he had meant

no harm to Lisbeth. Templin had no means of knowing what was in Blaisdell's mind.

However, his own determination was that Blaisdell should never get possession of Lisbeth. He felt differently about Stanton. Stanton had transgressed the laws of justice, and unless the hand of God intervened he would have to settle with Blaisdell as man to man. It was not Templin's affair; he would not interfere.

Templin had felt no concern for Stanton; had not been anxious about his injury; had been in no hurry to get the doctor. What he had done had been for Lisbeth. She had wanted a doctor.

Naturally she wanted to do what she could for her parent; she was concerned and anxious. She didn't know that Stanton was an unprincipled scoundrel. That was all right; Templin didn't want her to know. So far he had kept the knowledge from her. He would continue to keep it from her.

But he did not feel like rushing eagerly to Stanton with the doctor. It would be better for Stanton if he should die before Blaisdell met him face to face. Death for Stanton was certain, one way or another.

Templin was not a hypocrite. He could not pre-

tend to be eager to get Dr. Meeder to the Last Hope when he did n't care whether Stanton lived or died. So he loped his horse through the brilliant sunshine of the afternoon, never urging the animal.

Meeder became aware of Templin's unconcern.

"You don't appear to be in much of a hurry, Templin."

"We 're goin', doc."

"Yes, we are going. But you led me to believe the case was desperate. It is, is n't it?"

"I reckon."

"Well? The man may die before we get there!"

"Sure. Death don't stand around with his hat in hand, waitin' for a doctor to come."

"Ah!" exclaimed Meeder, with a quick glance into Templin's eyes. "You are a fatalist."

"Shucks, doc. A fatalist who had any faith in his creed would n't monkey with a doctor. A man would die when his time came, anyway."

"That 's so," agreed Meeder. "But it is the human thing to do as much as we can, anyway."

"There 's a chance for an argument there, doc. Suppose a man 's better off dead. Suppose he 's done a lot of mean things in his life, an' ain't got the grit to reform. An' supposin' punishment for his sins is waitin' for him, that it 's dead sure certain

he 's goin' to get paid for what he 's done. An' suppose there 's an innocent party goin' to suffer if it becomes known that he 's sinned?"

"Are you referring to yourself, Templin?" asked Meeder.

Templin flushed under the doctor's glance.

"Well," he admitted, "you got one in on me there, doc, for a fact. There 's certain folks that would n't be at all proud of me if they knew what I 've done."

Templin stared off toward a range of black mountains that fringed the wide valley through which they were riding. His lips were set in straight lines, his brow was furrowed.

"Our sins mostly never react upon us, Templin," continued Meeder. "The innocent nearly always suffer."

"You 're missin' now, doc." Templin's gaze was saturnine. "The innocent in my family died long ago. They 'll never know. I don't care a damn what the others think."

Thereafter they rode silently. They went out of the valley by way of a shallow draw that brought them to the crest of a ridge. Templin led the way, and his horse kept to an even pace.

Later they dropped to a flat where sacaton grass grew stirrup-high, and through which ran a deep gorge whose bottom was a tangled mass of wild

brush and gigantic rocks. They crossed the flat and rode into a forest of spruce and fir, where dry, light sand spumed upward and enveloped them.

The forest stretched far. The short, gnarled trees grew close together, obstructing the view. Templin, riding ahead, seemed to guide his horse from instinct rather than by knowledge of direction. Meeder, following Templin closely, soon became confused. He lost his temper, became profane.

Twice Templin looked back, to smile faintly at Meeder's bewilderment.

"It 's the straight trail, doc," he said. "You 'll remember recommendin' it farther back."

"Hell!" growled Meeder; "that 's rubbing it in."

"It 's a better trail than the others," continued Templin. "An' it 's not rode so much. I came over it yesterday, ahead of Norton and his posse. You see, I 'd got a ten-hour lead on Norton an' was figurin' to stretch it some. Norton was over beyond Dry Lake when Putt and Barkwell cashed in. Before they could get word to him an' get him back to view the corpses I had a big lead. Comin' this trail, I figured to add an hour or two to what I had. Seems I figured wrong, somehow. Norton cut my lead down right considerable."

"Templin, there 's something wrong about that deal. I don't believe you killed Putt and Barkwell.

Norton does n't believe it, either. Nor does King. King says you do not look like the man who did the shooting. I think—"

"Doc, it 's always a heap safer to do your thinkin' to yourself," gruffly said Templin.

Meeder was silenced. He could not classify the man in front of him. He suspected, though, that conscience was exacting its toll from him, that he was beginning to think of and to regret his past. At least, Meeder concluded, Templin's thoughts had been solemn once during the ride, even though they now appeared to be vicious.

Twice as they followed the tortuous trail through the forest Templin brought his horse to a halt, stood in the stirrups, and tried to peer over the tops of the trees surrounding him. Meeder, curious, endeavored to look also, but he was shorter than Templin and did not succeed.

A strange stealthiness in Templin's manner piqued Meeder's interest. As they rode on after the second halt he questioned Templin.

"Thinkin' again doc?" said Templin shortly. "If you was taller you would n't have to do so much of it. There 's some one comin' out there in the desert. Two. They 're ridin' this way. I saw them quite a piece back. They 're sure fannin' it some."

Templin rode on. Meeder followed, craning his neck several times in an effort to look over the tops of the trees.

A third time Templin's horse came to a halt. This time Meeder halted close to Templin. The trees had become scattered, stunted. They were on the edge of the forest. But Meeder observed that Templin had halted behind a mass of tangled brush that grew high above the head of his horse.

The desert began at the edge of the forest. Templin and Meeder had been descending a slight slope, and now Meeder concluded that if they had been riding a level Templin would not have been able to have seen what was going on out in the desert.

Meeder's view of the sand-level now was good. Miles away he could just see the roofs of some buildings. Although he had never been so far in this direction, he supposed the buildings belonged to the Last Hope; for he had heard there was no other ranch within a hundred miles of it. Between the buildings and the tangled brush which concealed himself and Templin was a wide, vast sand plain, treeless, unfeatured, desolate.

Meeder's gaze, however, was not upon the desert. He saw that subconsciously. He was searching for the riders Templin had mentioned, and after a moment's intense scrutiny he saw them.

They were not more than two or three miles distant and were coming fast. Meeder was able to determine their speed by the puffs of dust that arose from the hoofs of the horses.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "They 're coming!" He stared again, shading his eyes with his hands. Then he stiffened with excitement. "Templin," he yelled, "the first rider is a woman!"

"Shut your damned mouth!" came Templin's reply.

He was sitting rigid on the black horse. Meeder could not see his face, but something in his attitude sent Meeder into a trembling silence. He gripped the flanks of his horse with his legs in an effort to repress his excitement but only succeeded in making the animal prance.

"Meeder," came Templin's voice again, cold and sharp, "if you can't keep that damned horse still get down an' hold him. Throw him an' hold his head down."

Meeder clambered off and followed Templin's advice. Peering through the screening brush, he could still see the desert—could see the two riders coming. They appeared to be headed directly toward the thicket behind which he and Templin were concealed.

Now they had come close enough for the doctor

to see that the first rider, a woman, was losing ground. The second rider, a man, was gaining rapidly and was leaning over the mane of his horse urging the animal with quirt and spur.

The woman's hair was stringing out behind her, whipped by the wind created by the speed at which her horse was traveling. Her skirts were ballooning; she was hatless; she had lost one stirrup and was holding to the pommel of the saddle with one hand while she lashed the animal under her with the quirt in the other hand.

The pursuing rider was gaining; he closed the distance between him and the woman with amazing rapidity. But it was not until the animal ridden by the woman was within a few feet of the edge of the forest that the other rider drew near enough to show his purpose.

Then he swerved his horse quickly, and as it swept past the other he reached out an encircling hand and tried to drag the woman out of the saddle. He might have succeeded in that design had not the woman's horse jumped quickly aside.

Missing his clutch, the rider cursed. He had drawn his horse down; the animal tried to halt. But so great had been his momentum that he slid for a distance of several feet on his haunches before coming to a stop, and by that time the girl had

wheeled the animal under her and was riding frantically in the opposite direction, going directly back the way she had come.

She was quite a distance away when her pursuer got his horse turned. Meeder, absorbed in the scene, was still holding the head of his horse, having almost forgotten Templin. He now saw the black horse leap, heard the underbrush crash and crackle as the animal, seeming to move with the rapidity of a thunderbolt, flashed out of it.

Meeder saw only the back of Templin's head above the tips of the underbrush. Templin made no sound, uttered no word; and yet Meeder knew that retribution for the woman's pursuer was at hand.

Meeder leaped to his feet and threw himself into the saddle. When he rode out of the brush he saw Templin on the black horse racing after the other rider. Templin seemed to be about half a mile distant.

He saw Templin's right arm move with a long, graceful motion, as though he were throwing a flat stone and attempting to make it ricochet along the sand. He knew Templin had thrown his rope. Instantly he realized that the noose had fallen true, for the black horse halted, braced its legs.

He saw the woman's pursuer topple out of the saddle and fall face down in the dust. Then the black horse wheeled and trotted back toward the edge of the forest.

Meeder halted his horse and stared in amazement. He had expected Templin to dismount after roping the man; for certainly he would not attempt any sort of punishment without questioning the rider about his object in pursuing the woman.

But Templin did not dismount. He rode toward the edge of the forest, toward Meeder, dragging the rider after him in the dust. The rider was screeching, imploring, cursing. He had seized the rope, which had tightened around his neck, and was trying with his hands to tear it off. Templin made that task impossible by keeping the rope drawn taut.

Frequently, on the way to the edge of the forest, the captive rolled over. The black horse never stopped. The captive writhed, twisted. Part of the time his head was buried in the sand, turning it up and over into light, dry, feathery furrows on each side of him.

Templin seemingly paid no attention to the man. He came on, seeming a dread, implacable figure of vengeance.

Without appearing to notice that Meeder was sit-

ting on his horse watching him, Templin pulled the black horse down, wheeled the animal, and faced his captive.

Meeder watched while the man staggered to his feet. He clawed at the rope and succeeded in getting it off his neck. He bore no resemblance to a human being; the dust on his clothing was so thick that Meeder could not tell whether he wore any. Dust had been ground into his face; his hair was matted with it. Only his eyes, gleaming like pools of yellow fire, showed that he was a living man.

As he got the rope off and stood swaying, he uttered no sound.

"I reckon that ought to make you certain that I meant what I said when I told you not to clutter up this country any more, Mendezo!" said Templin. "I 'm lettin' you live, but I reckon you 'll never have any sense. Your horse is over there. Climb on him an' hit the breeze."

Mendezo swayed forward. And now Meeder saw that he was not hurt as much as he pretended to be. It was the thick dust upon him that gave the impression that he was injured to the point of complete collapse. Meeder saw that his step was firm, that his muscles were tensed.

He made his way to Templin's horse and stood there, whining piteously.

"Philippe mean no harm to Miss Stanton," he said thickly through the dust on his lips. "Pleeze; I go—I go—no more trouble."

Mendezo was standing at Templin's stirrup, on Meeder's side. Meeder caught the flash of a knife in the Mexican's hand and exclaimed sharply. The knife moved upward, slashing Templin's chaps near the hip as Templin, responsive to Meeder's cry, leaped his horse sidewise.

Cursing, Mendezo lunged again. A flame-spurt from Templin's gun met him, spun him around. He went to his hands and knees in the dust, turned his head, and glared his hatred at Templin. Then he plunged forward, writhing and groaning.

Templin sat motionless on his horse, watching the man. To Meeder it seemed a judicial watchfulness. It was as though, having pronounced sentence upon the man, he was waiting to see it executed. He seemed to have no animus, no rancor. What he had done had been imperative, inevitable, just.

CHAPTER XII

THE STRAIGHT TRAIL

MEEDER'S wonder over what he had seen was great. This tragedy had had a different beginning than that which he had witnessed in Wilcox, but the end had been the same. Tolver had been first to draw his gun; he had succumbed to the same deadly swiftness of eye and hand, to the same deadly marksmanship. The desert rider had been given the same chance. He, too, had failed.

Meeder's thoughts of the tragedy were tempered with admiration. What a man Templin would have been if he had devoted to some peaceful pursuit the wonderful coördination of hand and brain that he had twice exhibited!

Riding beside Templin, Meeder was impressed with his complete indifference to what had occurred. Templin was cold, calm. Not a muscle of his face betrayed the slightest emotion. His hand on the reins was steady; his eyes when he glanced at Meeder were as serene as when he had stepped into the Kunneen living-room; they were as gentle,

apparently, as they had been when he had smiled at Mrs. Kunneen.

Meeder wondered at the iron-like philosophy which governed the man's life and actions. He must feel he was justified in doing the things he did. His manner indicated as much. He had betrayed no concern after killing Tolver; apparently he felt not the slightest remorse over killing the desert rider. It seemed to Meeder that Templin must consider the men had met their just reward.

Meeder had to ride hard to keep up with Templin, for the black horse was running fast, and perceptibly gaining on the woman. The three traveled several miles before there came a change.

Then the woman looked back over her shoulder. She saw two riders where before there had been only one, and she must have divined that help had come, for she gradually slowed her horse and at last brought it to a halt and wheeled it so that she faced Templin and Meeder.

Templin drew his horse down also, thus giving Meeder a chance to come up. The doctor was close to Templin when at last the latter halted the black horse within a dozen feet of the woman.

Templin had recognized Lisbeth when she had been riding toward the edge of the forest, before her pursuer had almost caught her. The light in her

eyes as she sat in the saddle looking at him now brought color surging into his cheeks. She was glad to see him. For the first time since coming to the Last Hope he saw no resentment in her eyes, no hostility, no hatred; and a wild, fierce joy thrilled him.

Yet outwardly he was the man she had known yesterday. He knew her gratitude was merely for her deliverance; the glance she gave him she would have given any other man who had performed the same service for her. She was not grateful because he was Templin.

Lisbeth was trembling; her face was dead white. After a long look at Templin she closed her eyes and swayed in the saddle. In an instant he was beside her, leaning over, a hand gently patting her shoulder.

"Shucks," he said. "So he had to come back. There was n't any danger. We saw him long before he caught up to you. If there had been any danger I 'd have shot him out of the saddle. Some folks don't know when they 're well off."

She opened her eyes and looked straight into his.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

She was still trembling; her terror had not left her.

"Where a bad oiler ought to be, I reckon," he replied and gripped her shoulder gently as she closed her eyes.

When she again looked at Templin she tried to smile.

"I 'm glad you happened to be near," she said. "I 'm glad you killed him, I—I think. I suppose he deserved it. I—I thought he was still coming. When I heard the shooting I thought he was shooting at me. I should have looked back before, but I was afraid."

"You 'd have been mighty safe if you 'd have used that rifle you had yesterday," said Templin. "You 'll recollect that I told you mine would go right handy."

She smiled at the reproof in his voice. But the smile was shadowy; there was anxiety behind it.

"I did n't have time to think of a rifle," she said. "Father seemed to be getting worse. He did n't even know me. He raved terribly and complained of severe pains in his head. I—I thought you were never coming, that perhaps something had happened to you, that you would not be able to get a doctor. So I saddled and bridled a horse and rode this way, hoping to be able to get to Wilcox. I had n't got very far when I heard some one riding behind me. It was Philippe. I don't know where he came

from. He was still drunk; worse than yesterday, I think."

"Doc," said Templin, "I reckon you 'd better fan it to Stanton. We 'll be comin' right along."

Templin dropped his hand from Lisbeth's shoulder and sat motionless in the saddle, watching her. The girl's terrible ride had unnerved her. She tried bravely to fight off the tears that threatened to come. She failed, bowed her head, covered her eyes with her hands, and wept.

Templin backed his horse away and waited, gazing after Meeder. A little later Lisbeth's voice reached him. It was a quavering voice, but there was a new note in it.

"I feel better now," she said. "We 'll go back to the ranch, if you don't mind." She smiled at him through the tears that still dampened her eyelashes. "Is n't it strange that you should have been returning just as you did, and that you chose that particular trail? Father told me long ago that there are three trails to Wilcox."

"I rode the straight trail," said Templin.

She caught a significant note in his voice and looked quickly at him. Her gaze was bright, penetrating.

But she did not answer, made no comment. He rode beside her silently.

Again his thoughts were solemn. He was wondering if during his raving Stanton had disclosed his secret to Lisbeth. He thought not, for the girl's face would have betrayed some sign. She would not have seemed so light-hearted; there would be some shadow in the expression of her eyes that would have told him she knew.

He wondered over the impulse that had moved him to speak about riding a straight trail. He had seen that she had caught the subtle significance of his words.

It was the first time in many years that his cynical attitude toward life had permitted a thought of reformation. He had not wanted to reform. He was astonished that he had spoken the words. He had not intended to; they had been spoken before he realized it.

What he had done—the things he intended to do—he had done and would do for Lisbeth. There was no thought of self in the matter.

He was an outlaw, had been an outlaw. He would continue to kill people when he thought they deserved to be killed. He would continue to steal cattle whenever opportunity presented itself.

There was n't any mystery about his life, no tortuous mental processes. He had been governed by a simple principle, that of taking what he wanted

when he thought he wanted it, of defending his life by always managing to shoot first.

Until now his conscience had not troubled him. Nor was he certain that he was troubled at this instant. He did n't regret having killed men. He had n't wantonly murdered any one.

What bothered him was that there seemed to be in him a yearning to please the girl who rode at his side. Above all, he did n't want her to suffer for the sins of her parent; he did n't want her to know that Stanton was a sinner.

They rode on toward the ranch-house. There were no further words spoken. Templin was aware that Lisbeth looked at him several times; she seemed to be studying his profile. He did not return her glances. He was content to ride beside her. It was strangely satisfying.

When they crossed Big Sandy, Templin saw Meeder come out of the kitchen door and stand upon the veranda. Meeder waved his hands excitedly.

Templin was first to reach the edge of the veranda. Meeder shouted at him:

"Something has happened here, Templin. The house is a wreck. There 's been a fight here. There 's blood on the kitchen floor. Stanton is n't here!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE WOMAN BARGAINS

TEMPLIN scowled at Meeder for blurting out his news so abruptly. He threw a swift glance at Lisbeth, who had reached the veranda almost as soon as he. He expected she would collapse, that he would have to catch her when she fell from her horse.

To his astonishment she continued to sit firmly in the saddle. Her face whitened, and her eyes grew big and bright, but she rode her horse to the edge of the veranda and dismounted, to stand for an instant looking from one to the other of the two men.

She seemed curiously calm, almost resigned. She looked last at Templin; it was a look of intense inquiry. She herself answered the question her eyes had asked:

"Blaisdell!" she said.

She knew, then.

Templin did not ask her how she knew. He was convinced that during his absence Stanton had talked. He saw Meeder's eyes interrogating Lis-

beth, as if he wanted to know how she knew Blaisdell had visited the house during her absence.

In an instant Templin was at Meeder's side. He gripped the doctor's arm and shoved him toward the kitchen door.

"Let 's have a look, doc," he said.

As he passed through the doorway, pushing Meeder ahead of him, Templin glanced back at Lisbeth. She had paused at the veranda and stood there dispiritedly, her shoulders drooping, her hands hanging limply at her sides.

In the kitchen there was evidence of a violent battle. Chairs had been overturned; several were broken. The kitchen table had been upset; a glass door in a cupboard had been smashed. Dishes had been shattered to fragments; there was a splotch of blood on the oil-cloth that covered the counter-shelf of the cupboard, and another splotch on the floor in front of it.

Silently Templin viewed the wreck of the room. With Meeder watching him curiously, he went to the sink, got a cloth, some soap, and water, and scrubbed the blood from the counter-shelf and floor. He threw the cloth out of a rear door and began to set things in place. After watching him for a few moments Meeder helped him.

They carried the broken chairs out through the

rear door, righted the table, and collected the broken dishes. Half a dozen times while engaged in this work Templin glanced out of a window at Lisbeth. The girl had dropped into a chair. She sat there, leaning back, staring at the ceiling. Once he saw her lips quiver.

After the kitchen had been cleared up Templin looked at Meeder.

"Doc," he said, "hop on your cayuse an' ride around the corral. The fence needs mendin'."

Meeder's face flushed.

"What in the devil do you mean?" he demanded coldly. He met Templin's level gaze, saw his eyes gleam with satanic humor.

"Oh, sure!" he said. "I noticed that myself."

He went out, mounted his horse and rode toward Big Sandy. Watching him through a window, Templin saw him glance curiously at Lisbeth as he passed. But the girl did not appear to notice him. Dr. Meeder reached the corral, began to ride around it.

Templin stepped out upon the veranda, walked to Lisbeth, and stood in front of her, looking down at her.

She looked up at him, met his gaze, held it.

"So you know, eh?" he said.

"Yes." She slipped forward in the chair, rested

an elbow on one of the arms, and raised a hand to her chin. The thumb went under her chin, the index-finger was laid against her cheek, while the second finger was doubled and pressed tightly against her lips. The other hand, lying limply in her lap, seemed lifeless.

"I was hopin' you would n't find it out," said Templin. "I tried mighty hard to keep it from you."

"I know," she answered. "It was very noble of you. But I knew as soon as you knew. I was just outside the door, listening. I heard everything.

"I heard you when you came out of the room. You said, 'Damn your miserable hide, Stanton, you ought to suffer.' I suppose you had a right to feel that way. But I don't, Templin! I don't believe he did that. He could n't, Templin; he 's my father!"

The old cynical mood was upon Templin. He felt that Stanton had told the truth. Lisbeth would be loyal to her parent, of course; Templin would have been disappointed in her if she were not loyal. But Stanton had convinced him, and he could not play the hypocrite.

"A man's conscience won't do any lyin' to him, ma'am," he said.

He saw a shudder pass through the girl. He pitied her, but he had spoken his conviction.

Her helplessness was apparent. She knew she could do nothing. She did not know the country; she could not have followed one of the faint trails that led from the Last Hope to one of the far towns. She would be lost before she had traveled a dozen miles.

She did not know where Blaisdell had taken her father; she did not know the location of Blaisdell's headquarters that she might follow the outlaw there to demand the release of her parent.

There was none who might help her except Dr. Meeder or Templin. And Templin believed her father guilty. He would not go. Meeder, she was certain, could not help her. He was too heavy to ride far or fast; he wore no gun; she was convinced he was as helpless as she.

She got up, faced Templin. She was pale, but her eyes held an expression of quiet resolution.

"Where is Blaisdell's place?" she asked.

"You 'd never be able to find it, ma'am, even if I told you."

"I am going to try. I am going after my father!"

"That 's foolishness, ma'am. In the first place, you 'd never find Blaisdell's cache. In the second

place, if you did happen to stumble on it, Blaisdell would grab you quicker than a wink! There 's no sense of you tryin'."

"You could go with me, Templin."

He smiled. "I reckon not, I don't value my life a heap, but I ain't figurin' on throwin' it away. The bars are down between me an' Blaisdell's boys. If I went over there I 'd be runnin' straight into hell!"

"I thought you were brave, Templin!"

He flushed but shook his head. "I reckon I 'm not fool enough to bust in on Blaisdell that way, ma'am."

"Where is the cache, Templin?" she persisted.

"How do you know Blaisdell 's got him?" Templin equivocated.

"Ah, Templin! You know no other person would take him away like that. Blaisdell thinks father is guilty of—of what he said to you. Blaisdell took him away because he wants to torture him. You know that as well as I. Please tell me where the cache is, Templin!"

Templin shook his head. "It 's no place for a woman to go. I won't tell you."

"You must!"

"I reckon not. There 's things in this world that no man can change or help. What 's between your

dad an' Blaisdell will have to work itself out."

Lisbeth felt the finality in Templin's manner. It seemed to her, also, that Fate had planned the entire affair; that Templin, Kelton, Stagg, and Givins were all puppets that answered to the pulling-strings of Providence. There was no way for her to help her father. She thought of the sheriff. If Norton knew where to find Blaisdell he would have brought him and his band to justice before this.

For an instant she stood looking straight into Templin's eyes, trying her best to fight off the feeling of complete impotency that suddenly assailed her. She bit her lips, clenched her hands; tried again to speak, to demand that Templin tell her where she could find the cache.

No words came. She saw no signs of relenting in Templin's steady eyes. She moved away from him, her hands hanging limply at her sides, her head bowed. She walked to one of the columns of the veranda and leaned against it, sobbing quietly.

Templin stood, watching her. A strange, fierce fire was flaming in his heart, a seething chaos of passion that made his brain reel.

He did not move for many seconds for fear the passion that had gripped him would become ungovernable. For years passion had ruled him. It had made him what he had become; it had

made him scoff at laws; it had filled him with wild impulses, with a reckless disregard for constraint of any kind. For years he had only to reach out and grasp the things he had wanted.

He knew now, standing there, that he had come to the Last Hope because he had wanted Lisbeth Stanton. He had heard tales of her beauty; other men had discussed her until his brain had taken fire. When he had headed toward the Last Hope he had meant to take Lisbeth before Blaisdell could get her. He had been jealous of the outlaw chief.

Since he had been at the Last Hope he had had impulses of righteousness. They had filtered through his consciousness like feeble rays of light stabbing a great darkness, and he had paid attention to them perhaps because they had been novel. Once or twice they had caused him to think that perhaps there was a sort of basic righteousness in his heart, seeking reformation; and his thoughts at those times had been solemn, considering the prospects of a new life.

But there had been no disguising the fact that during it all he had wanted Lisbeth. All the satisfaction he had felt in being near her, all the virtuous thoughts he had had, the thrill of protecting her from Kelton and the other two men, the humility

he had felt when serving her—all these sensations had been his because he had felt that she was for him. And now he knew she was to be his.

He walked toward her; stood close to her, looking down at her. He reached out, laid both hands upon her shoulders.

Lisbeth looked up, met his gaze, and drew a breath of deep amazement. She grasped his hands and tried to loosen his grip on her shoulders. Failing, she stood, pale and trembling, frightened by the strange intensity of his eyes.

"Templin!" she cried. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this," he said. His voice was hoarse; it had a queer, metallic ring. But she could see that he was fighting for his self-control, that he knew his strange manner was frightening her, and that he was striving to be the Templin she knew.

"I mean this," he went on. "You 've spoken of me goin' to the cache. If I go there the chances are I 'll not come back. A hundred to one. I came to the Last Hope after you. I want you. I want to marry you. I 'll reform. I 'll do anything for you. If I go to Blaisdell's cache for your father, if I bring him back to you alive, will you marry me? You 've got a chance to escape that," he added when he saw her gasp, felt her shoulders quiver under his

touch. "The chances are that I won't come back. If I don't, you 'll have no father. If I do, you 'll have both a father and a husband."

Her gaze dropped from his, though she made no further effort to escape the grip of his hands. She stood there, staring down at the veranda floor, her thoughts as wildly chaotic as his.

Templin, she realized, was offering her an alternative, was offering her father a chance of life at the risk of his own. In order to save her father she would have to sacrifice her future; she would have to marry Templin, a notorious outlaw.

It was n't fair; still Templin was offering more than she. He would risk his life while she would risk nothing but her future happiness. If Blaisdell's men killed him she need not worry about the future. If he returned she would have her father with her to help her, to insure her happiness.

And as to Templin? She was uncertain about her feelings toward him. From the beginning he had interested her. Even when he had forced her to cut his hair she had felt strangely attracted. She had experienced an exhilaration that had been new to her.

Secretly, while hating him, she had admired him. She had been at a loss to define her contradictory emotions, and so she had not attempted it, believing

that one day he would ride out of her life as suddenly as he had ridden into it.

But now she knew that he did not intend to ride away. He had revealed his reason for coming to the Last Hope. He had come for her! He was willing to risk his life for her! At a stroke, in a breath, he had declared himself.

She could not have told how it happened. She thought she must have nodded her head, though afterward she could not remember doing it. Or perhaps it had been because she had grasped his wrists to release the grip of his fingers, which were hurting her. She could not be certain.

But suddenly she was swung off her feet and lifted upward, her body against Templin's. She struggled silently but vainly to ward off the kisses that were placed on her cheeks, her lips, her hair.

And then as suddenly she was again standing, while Templin was striding away, toward his horse. She heard his voice; it seemed to float to her from a vast distance: "Have Meeder stay here till I get back!" And then she saw the black horse leap away from the edge of the veranda and go thundering northward.

CHAPTER XIV

IMMUNITY OF THE MAD

TEMPLIN rode into a darkening world. He was fiercely exultant, but he had not ridden more than a mile or two when there came a swift reaction. Lisbeth had consented, had accepted his offer. She was his, but he had tricked her into consenting.

He had n't won her as he had wanted to win her, on his merits. He knew now that he had had some such thought in mind when he had come to the Last Hope. It had n't been a tangible thought; he had not built any hopes on it, but it had been there, sticking in his mind with strange persistence.

He could n't win her in the way a man should win a woman. It was too much to expect. He had permitted his wild impulses to get the better of him; he had been a fool.

He smiled cynically into the dusk ahead of him, veering the black horse slightly and sending him toward a cleft in a range of black mountains directly

northward. He kept the black loping swiftly, over the gray floor of the desert, into a region as trackless as the surface of a calm sea.

Lisbeth had had no choice. She had accepted because she meant to save her father from Blaisdell. She did n't love him; she could n't. It was too much to expect. He did n't expect it. When he returned to the Last Hope—if he did return—she would find means to make him see that she did not expect the bargain to bind her.

Well, let her find such means. He would know, and he would accept her verdict. He 'd have to, of course, because he would n't want her if he had to take her unwillingly.

Mentally he cursed himself for losing his head. But he still retained the memory of the kisses he had given her, although he knew there had been no response.

He passed through the cleft in the mountains about midnight. Down in a gorge that he had to cross to reach the floor of a valley he halted to let the black horse drink from a small stream that trickled over some rocks to form a clear pool in the sand. He stood for some time after letting the horse drink, staring into the pool, which gleamed like silver in the moonlight that came over his shoulder.

"Clear as that," he said to the water, thinking of Lisbeth's eyes.

Men had some reason for coming into the world; each had certain things to do. After those things had been accomplished Death ambushed them. That was his thought. His had been a pointless life until now. He had roved here and there, and he had done nothing worthy of a man, nothing to justify his existence. Things might have been different.

"I reckon elder brothers have a way of shaping a man's life," he ruminated. "One had a hell of a lot to do with mine."

Kickin' did n't do any good. Maybe he was a hellion from the start. Judging from the life he led, that was a good conclusion. As good as any other.

One thing he had done: he had killed men who needed killing. He supposed they had accomplished what they had been created for, and he had acted as Death's ambush. That was his view, and as he rode on he vindicated it from a recollection of how the men he had killed had deserved their fate.

"One by the Rio Pecos. He 'd been let live too long when I met him. One in Durango. He trifled with me too much. Another in Tularosa. An oiler who tried to knife me. Kelton. Kelton's

swell head killed him, I reckon. Tolver followed Blaisdell's orders too enthusiastically. Another oiler. He lived as long as he did for a purpose. Maybe that purpose ain't so plain; maybe it will be plainer after a while. But there 's sure a purpose."

His time was coming, he knew. Death for him would come from the muzzles of guns in the hands of Blaisdell or his men. One man would not do it; he was convinced of that. There would have to be more.

Blaisdell—well, perhaps if Blaisdell was in extra fine fettle he might be quick enough. Or Blaisdell might see him first and shoot from behind. But he doubted that. Blaisdell was n't a coward.

It was strange how he kept thinking of the critical moment—when he should be face to face with Blaisdell or some of his men. Of one thing he was certain: he would not go alone. Several would die with him. He was n't afraid to go alone, but he 'd prefer company. That was pure malice, but he enjoyed thinking of it.

The moon sank beyond the horizon shortly after he had ridden out of the valley and was making his way over a little plain that stretched into some timber-crested hills northward. But he knew the trail, and he kept the black horse loping steadily.

When he came at last to the hills he halted the black and sat silently in the saddle, listening. Fully five minutes passed before he moved. Close to him he caught the tracery of a clump of dense brush; farther along the conical tips of some spruce trees appeared against the darkly luminous velvet of the starlit sky. The hills in front of him formed a ragged line, the diamond points of stars glittering above their peaks.

Far behind—southward—loomed the peak of a distant mountain, a silvery lance from the setting moon bathing its peak. The land over which he had traveled was far below; for hours he had traversed an upland. Except for the luminous peak of the mountain the land behind him appeared as a black gulf.

In front of him the darkness was equally dense. But he urged the black horse forward cautiously, although confidently. Shortly he was facing the moraine at the base of the hills. He rode upward, to a rocky bench. There he halted again and listened. Presently he rode on again, straight into a clump of trees. Far back in the wood he dismounted, tied the horse, and went forward on foot.

In the daylight, a rider on the desert below, glancing upward at the range of hills, would have thought they formed a solid though irregular ridge

of granite. Templin knew better. The clump of trees through which he was now making his way concealed the outlines of a natural bridge. The trees grew in front of and under the arch, completely concealing it from view on the desert.

Templin went through the arch to a stretch of level ground. Tall grass whipped his legs as he walked forward. He knew every foot of the cache. Beyond the hidden arch was a fertile valley with a small stream of water running through it.

On the right, dotting a wide level, were a dozen adobe houses. One of them had been his home. At a little distance from the others, far enough away to give to it an air of exclusiveness, was Blaisdell's house.

Blaisdell's house was more pretentious than the others. A little veranda ran across its front and partly around one side. Lace curtains adorned its windows. It was furnished luxuriously.

Templin now went forward with extreme caution. He saw only one light in the cache, and that gleamed through one of the windows of Blaisdell's house. But he could not be sure that the other houses were unoccupied until he investigated.

He circled each shanty, stood beside windows and listened. It seemed, except for the presence of a light in Blaisdell's house that the cache was deserted.

To make certain he went to the horse-corral—circled it. In the star-haze he could just distinguish the dark shapes of several horses. These, he knew, constituted the remuda. Most of the horses were missing. That meant that Blaisdell's men were away.

Perhaps he was n't to die to-night, after all. Perhaps his time had not come. Something remained to be done. He went toward Blaisdell's house. He was almost light-hearted.

Blaisdell's house, he knew, contained three rooms. There was the front room. The light he had seen was in that. Then there was a big wing. That was Blaisdell's den and bedroom. The kitchen ran straight back from the front room.

Templin halted at one of the unlighted windows of the kitchen. It was open. He cautiously stuck his head in and glanced into the front room.

He saw a light in the center of the room, an oil-lamp on a little table. There was a rug on the floor; several big chairs were scattered about. There were pictures and lace curtains and a book-case.

Sitting in one of the big chairs, his profile toward Templin, was Blaisdell. He was leaning back in the chair, an elbow resting on one of its arms. His chin was in the palm of the braced hand.

Blaisdell was a big man, lithe, muscular. His hair, now turning gray, had been black. It was glossy, virile, and abundant. His forehead was high, well formed. His eyes were gray, keen, steady.

He wore a gray flannel shirt, which was slightly open at the collar, disclosing a bronzed, firm neck. He wore a pair of dark trousers, the bottoms stuck into boot-tops. The boots were spurred, showing that he had reached the cache not far in advance of Templin.

A heavy revolver was at his right hip. Templin observed that the weapon was shoved slightly forward so that it might readily be reached by the hand that braced Blaisdell's chin.

In a corner opposite Blaisdell sat Stanton. He was facing Blaisdell. Stanton seemed bewildered; his gaze was vacuous. His hands were crossed in front of him; the fingers were twining and untwining nervously, betraying a woeful lack of ability to concentrate his thoughts upon the present.

He would look quickly at Blaisdell, at the floor, at the ceiling, at the lamp in front of him. His eyes were never still, nor his fingers. He was more distraught than when Templin had been with him the day he had raved about Jefford. His mind was still wandering; he could not comprehend what had

happened to him; no cool, sane thought came to comfort him.

Templin continued to watch the two. The minutes dragged, and there came no sound from either man. Stanton continued to twine his fingers; his restless and tortured eyes still held the same uncomprehending light.

Meanwhile, Blaisdell did not move his head a quarter of an inch. He sat there, staring straight at Stanton. He seemed to be studying the man. It was as though he thought Stanton's insanity were a sham, a trick by which he hoped to evade punishment.

At last, it seemed, Stanton began to feel that Blaisdell's silence portended evil. He looked at Blaisdell more frequently; he licked his dry lips, moved his feet with a queer, shuffling motion, and shifted his hands to the arms of the chair, gripping them tightly. The other's continued silence was torturing him.

"Blaisdell!" he almost screamed. "What do you mean by looking at me like that? Why don't you say something? Do something? What did you bring me here for?"

"You know me, eh?" said Blaisdell. His voice was low, deliberate. It was expressionless; his gaze was still unwavering.

"Yes; I know you! You knew that! I knew you when you came to the ranch-house! You want revenge. I know that, also! Why don't you take it? Why don't you shoot me and have it over with?"

"You 're not so crazy as you pretend to be, Stanton," said Blaisdell. "But you were crazy to come out here." He moved the fingers that lay along his cheek. "What made you come out here?"

"I came to get away from your wife, Blaisdell! And your daughter! They 've been following me! Everywhere! They 're out here! They 've walked beside my horse in the desert!"

Blaisdell did not move.

"So you 've seen them, eh? Well, that ought to be good for your soul," he said. "If you 've been seeing them right along you must have been enjoying yourself.

"Come on, now; quit faking. Pretending you are crazy is n't going to help you any. You are going to have quite a time of it, Stanton. Between you and me, before I get through with you, you will wish you were crazy.

"Do you know what is going to happen to you? You 're going to do just what my wife and daughter did; you are going to starve to death, Stanton. 'An

eye for a eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Understand?"

Stanton straightened. He grew calm, composed. His mouth became more firm, his eyes more steady.

"I am ready to take my punishment, Blaisdell," he said. "I know I am guilty. As guilty as Jefford, perhaps. But my guilt was the guilt of negligence.

"I did n't know what was going on. I trusted Jefford. He told me it was a strict business deal, that everything was straight. That it was just a matter of buying and selling. I did n't know until too late what had been done. Then I did n't have the courage to face you. I felt guilty; I am guilty!

"But if I could find the letter Jefford wrote me before he died I could show you that I did n't know what was going on. Jefford wrote such a letter, confessing his guilt. He 'd forged my name a number of times. He took all the blame. But Jefford died. I lost the letter. I became terror-stricken. I came out here. And then what do you think happened? Blaisdell, Jefford came back to life! Sure as you 're Blaisdell! He came out here. He was at the Last Hope the other day. I had a talk with him. I told him he was guilty. Why don't you come back to the Last Hope with me? I 'll go with you. We 'll ask him about the

letter he wrote me. We 'll get this thing straight!"

Blaisdell laughed grimly.

"I see," he said. "You had a letter. But you lost it. Jefford died. But he came to life again. He 's out here. Stanton, you 're clever, but you can't put that over. You are going to have a lot of time to think things—"

Blaisdell paused. He started to turn his head, but did not. He had heard a sound from the kitchen; he felt a presence behind him. Except that the fingers that lay along his cheek stiffened, he remained as he had been all along, perfectly motionless.

Templin had softly entered the kitchen door. He now stood behind Blaisdell, just beyond the door, in the kitchen. He had drawn his six-shooter; it was in the palm of his right hand, the muzzle projecting a little.

Blaisdell held his position. Stanton had got to his feet at sight of Templin. He now shrieked the name, "Jefford!" and collapsed in his chair, inert, unconscious.

"Blaisdell," said Templin from behind the outlaw chief's chair, "keep sittin'."

"Templin!" ejaculated Blaisdell.

"Correct. It 's Templin. I 've come to take a load of responsibility off your hands, Blaisdell. A

crazy man. That 's a fact. Stanton's plumb loco. Kelton busted him over the head with his six-shooter. it 's cracked Stanton's skull, an' he 's seein' things. Thinks I 'm Jefford."

Still Blaisdell did not attempt to turn around.

"Thinks you are Jefford, eh?" he said. "Just step where I can get a look at you, Templin."

Templin moved forward, backing away and making a wide circle so that Blaisdell could n't reach him if he should be contemplating trickery. He backed to the center of the room and stood behind the lamp that Blaisdell might get a good look at him.

Blaisdell's gaze was searching. But in the end he laughed.

"Stanton 's sure crazy. Think of him taking you for Jefford!" Blaisdell shook his head. "Ha, ha, ha! That 's good—damned good! There 's a faint resemblance. Stubborn and self-opinionated as you are, Templin, you 're a man! Jefford was n't. Jefford was a sneak."

Blaisdell narrowed his eyes at Templin, sat erect in the chair and folded his arms back of his head.

"There," he said; "just to show you that I don't mean to try any monkey business. I would n't with you, anyway, Templin. When you and I clash it will be a case of the devil take the hindmost. Now,

you 've been listening to myself and Stanton. Do you know what happened between us twenty years ago?"

"I 've a pretty good idea. Between Stanton and the Jefford he speaks of they made things interesting for you."

"Damned interesting, Templin. I had a little money, a good wife, and a daughter. Stanton made me see that I had an opportunity in Europe. I accepted it. Before I sailed Stanton induced me to intrust my money to him. Told me he 'd double it for me. Said he 'd take care of my wife and daughter. I had just time to catch the boat, and I could n't attend to details. I was n't in such a hurry getting back, but when I did come I found I was wiped out. My wife and daughter were dead. I found that Stanton had invested my money in a wildcat scheme and had permitted my wife and daughter to starve.

"There 's no evidence; it was all perfectly legal; and it was my own fault that I left my wife and daughter unprotected. I don't kick about that. I suppose if I 'd have been able to get hold of Stanton and Jefford when I got back I 'd have killed them. I 'd have been hanged for murder. It 's different now. That 's all there is to it.

"I suppose most people would say it is just chance

that sent Stanton out here, where I could get my hands on him. But I know better; it was Fate. My account with him has got to be squared."

"You can't square any account with a crazy man, Blaisdell."

"No; that 's the hell of it. Stanton 's loco. I can see that now. For a while I did n't believe it; I thought he was shamming. Well, you did n't come here to pay me a friendly visit. What did you come for?"

"To take Stanton back to the Last Hope. I 've got a doctor waitin' for him there."

"Expect to cure him, eh?"

"I think there 's a chance."

"Well, go ahead. He 's no good to me the way he is. Killing him outright would n't suffice for me. I figured on something slower. I 'll wait till he gets over it; he can't get away. I expect you noticed when you came in that none of the boys are at the cache. That 's right. They 're scattered around the country. Every trail is guarded. No one is to get away from the Last Hope. You understand that, Templin?"

"My hearin' is still good, I reckon."

Blaisdell laughed. "So much the better. I 'm going to wipe that place out. All except the girl. She comes here!"

Templin's eyes gleamed; he stiffened.

Blaisdell chuckled. "That gets you, eh?" he mocked. "You thought when you downed Kelton I 'd quit fooling around. You don't know me, Templin. I 'm not going to have my dream of vengeance spoiled by a love-sick traitor!"

Templin's face had whitened. He stepped toward Blaisdell, stood near him, and looked steadily into his eyes.

"I come pretty near sympathizin' with you a minute ago, Blaisdell," he said. "I sure did. You got a raw deal, somehow, if you 're tellin' the truth. You sounded a whole lot like a man. But now you 're turnin' into the thing I thought you was when I broke off with you, a damned yellow coyote! I downed Kelton because he dared come to the Last Hope for Lisbeth Stanton. I 'll pulverize any other man that comes there for the same purpose. That goes for you! You can do your damned waitin', an' you can guard all the trails if you want to. Seems to me it was a mighty good thing your wife and daughter died before they found out what kind of a yellow guy you were."

"You 'll pay for that, Templin!"

"Right now if you 're willin'!" answered Templin. "I 'd be a heap glad to have an excuse. If

you 're meanin' business get up on your feet an' flash your gun!"

Blaisdell sneered palely.

"There 's plenty of time. You 'll get plenty of gun-play out of this if you stick around the Last Hope!"

"I reckon that ends the diplomacy," said Templin. "I 'm showin' you how I do things when my fur is rubbed the wrong way. Get your hands down an' put them in your pockets!" He waited until Blaisdell lowered his hands and obeyed the latter part of the command. Then he reached forward, deftly plucked Blaisdell's gun from its holster, and tossed it through an open window near him.

"Now get up an' turn your back to me!" he ordered.

Blaisdell obeyed.

"When I come in I noticed two horses with saddles and bridles on standin' in that little juniper-grove back of the shack," went on Templin. "I reckon one of them is yours an' the other is a Last Hope horse. Stanton rode it, I expect. Stanton 's goin' to ride it back. You carry Stanton out an' put him on that horse."

Stanton was still unconscious and a light burden for Blaisdell, though the latter cursed profanely as he strode out of the door.

Templin compelled Blaisdell to lash Stanton to the Last Hope horse, made Blaisdell mount his own. Then he walked behind the outlaw chief and Stanton out of the cache, under the concealed archway to the place in the wood where he had left his own animal.

On the bench beyond the wood Blaisdell drew his horse down. But Templin laughed lowly.

"It 's a heap dark, an' I 'm feelin' the need of company," he said. "You 'll be ridin' with us part of the way, Blaisdell," he told the other.

At dawn, with the Last Hope buildings in sight, Templin halted and looked at the outlaw chief.

"You 'll be needin' your beauty-sleep, Blaisdell," he said gruffly. "You 'd better fan it back to the cache!"

He sat for some time motionless in the saddle, watching Blaisdell's progress northward. Then he went on toward the Last Hope.

The task of rescuing Stanton had been ridiculously easy. Had he been fortunate, or had Destiny stepped in? That was a question for which he could not provide an answer. Nor did he ponder over it as he had pondered on his way to the cache. He was being saved for something, and he hoped it was for the purpose of serving Lisbeth. That was all.

CHAPTER XV

A VOLUNTEER COOK

LISBETH saw him coming. Templin caught a glimpse of her as she came to the edge of the veranda and peered northward, shading her eyes with her hands. She could have seen him without doing that, he knew, and so he decided that, if she expected him at all, she did not expect his return so soon.

He observed that she quickly dropped her hands from her eyes, that she straightened. Then she must have seen the burden carried by the second horse, for she leaped off the veranda and came running toward him.

He was not more than two hundred yards from the ranch-house when she reached him. She paid no attention to him whatever, did not, he was certain, even look at him, just then. It was not until after she had convinced herself that Stanton was still alive that she indicated that she knew Templin was near. Then it was very plain that she was not thinking of Templin at all but of her father.

"Hurry, please!" she urged. "I 'll get Dr. Meeder up!"

She was running back toward the ranch-house before Templin could speak to her.

But he did n't know whether he wanted to speak now.

She had n't noticed him; had almost—except for the one glance—seemed to ignore his existence. There had not been one word of praise for his deed.

"No applause for the returnin' hero," was his cynical thought.

Well, what did he expect? Nothing. And, of course, he had n't been disappointed. Had n't he known, half an hour after he left the ranch-house, that he would n't get any reward? Had n't he assured himself that he did n't expect a reward, did n't deserve one? He had been right; he was still right. Besides, why should he expect a reward?

Rescuing Stanton had n't been a stupendous task. Not nearly as great as he had expected it to be. Fate had a habit of playing just such tricks. Tasks were like hills; they were bigger from a distance than when one got on top of them. Looking backward no task is hard.

He felt rather futile, rather ridiculous. Kissing

Lisbeth had been a rather boyish thing to do. Under the circumstances it must have seemed to her a very melodramatic thing. Why could n't he have played the man and gone after Stanton as he should have gone, without making a fuss, without making a fool of himself?

Well, he had n't done that, had he? That was because he had lost his head. He never had been much of a man to control his passions. That was what had made him an outlaw.

Oh, hell! He did n't care. He liked Lisbeth, of course, and no matter what she did or said he 'd keep on liking her.

He was damned sleepy. Let Meeder and Lisbeth take care of Stanton. They 'd slept all night; he had n't. He sat very quietly on his horse when he reached the edge of the veranda and with saturnine gaze watched Meeder and Lisbeth get Stanton off the horse and carry him into the house.

Then he rode his horse to the corral, pulled off saddle and bridle, and turned him into the inclosure. He carried the saddle and bridle to the stable; stopped at the watering-trough and washed his face and hands; stood for a little while near one of the columns of the veranda smoking a cigarette. Then, no one paying any attention to him, he went into the

bedroom he had occupied, threw off his clothes, and went to bed.

When he got up the sun was slanting over some hills westward. He put on his clothes, looked out of a window at the sun, stared at his reflection in a small mirror.

It was n't a face that would arouse the admiration of a woman. Far from it. He knew that. What in the devil had he been thinking about when he had kissed Lisbeth, when he had asked her to marry him?

He quietly let himself out of the house, went to the stable, got his shaving-kit, and shaved at the watering-trough.

There was no sound from the house. Lisbeth and Meeder were busy with Stanton, he supposed.

After shaving he smoked several cigarettes, standing by a corner of the corral fence. He felt a strange isolation. He did n't belong at the Last Hope, had never belonged.

He could n't be included in any home scheme. He never had been. Not even when in his father's house. He had always felt that he was somewhere outside the intimate circle. In the dark; in the cold. There had been no confidences. Every wish, every advance he had made had been disregarded. His

had been a superfluous entity, valuable only to himself.

He was n't wanted at the Last Hope. Yet he could n't go away now. He would be needed to protect Lisbeth from Blaisdell. Meeder could n't protect her; Stanton could n't.

So no matter what Lisbeth thought of him he would have to stay. He supposed, too, that he would have to endure her scorn and contempt. But that did n't matter; he would stay, anyway.

After a while he heard a sound in the kitchen. That meant Lisbeth was down-stairs.

He went to the kitchen door and looked in. Lisbeth was standing near the stove. A coffee-pot was in her hands. She looked straight at Templin, quickly dropped her gaze, and blushed.

She was embarrassed, of course. Naturally she would be. He thought her forbearance wonderful; he would not have been astonished if she had berated him, if she had ordered him off the place.

She set the coffee-pot on the stove. Standing very rigid she said quietly:

"I want to thank you for bringing father back. I did n't expect you would be able to do it. I have n't slept a wink. Before daylight I was out on the porch, looking for you!"

"Shucks," he said. "It was n't anything. Not

a bit of danger. Blaisdell was there alone. I just went in to him; told him I was takin' your dad home. He did n't object. He 'd found out that your dad was n't in his right mind."

He could n't tell her that Blaisdell had threatened to wipe out the Last Hope; that all the trails were guarded so that none could escape until Blaisdell got ready to attack. He did n't want her to worry.

She looked at him with an odd intentness; the merest hint of a smile was on her lips.

Very quietly she spoke.

"You told me going to the cache would be dangerous. It would have been dangerous if the other men had been there. Is n't that so?"

"I reckon. But that ain't the point. As it turned out, there was n't any danger. I 've been thinkin' this thing over. I 'm goin' to be square about it. I 'm withdrawin' what I said about—about marryin'. I ain't holdin' you to it."

Abruptly she turned her back and walked to the kitchen table. Her voice floated to him over her shoulder.

"That is very considerate of you, Templin," she said.

It seemed to Templin that she was n't as glad as she should have been. That, of course, was because she had never meant to agree to his proposal and

had not felt bound by the incident. And he was certain there had been a suggestion of mockery in her voice.

He expected that.

He was n't concerned about Stanton, but to change a subject that threatened to react to his disadvantage he asked her about her father.

"He is still unconscious. Dr. Meeder and I have worked with him all day. The doctor would n't permit me to stay in the room while he operated, but he said there was some pressure on father's brain, which he has removed. But it will be many days before father will be able to get up."

"Well, I 'm glad Meeder 's got ability."

They heard the doctor's step in the living-room. He paused on the threshold and smiled at them, rubbing the palms of his hands together.

"The patient is doing nicely," he announced. "He 's going to require a lot of care, which only his daughter can give him. I suppose I shall have to stay here three or four days; maybe more." He looked at Lisbeth, at the dish she now held.

"We 'll have to find a new cook," he said. "Miss Stanton's time must be given to her father. Templin, you 've roughed it. Suppose you do the cooking?"

"I 'm agreeable."

Lisbeth looked quickly at Templin; the way she had looked at him when he had told her that the task of rescuing her father had n't been anything. As before there was the shadow of a smile on her lips. But this time he definitely observed another expression. It was wonder.

For the next two days he puzzled over the expression in an attempt to establish a reason for it. Lisbeth and Meeder did not trouble him much except at meal-time, when he was driven to anxiety lest Lisbeth find fault with the lack of variety in the by no means meager fare. Stanton's storehouse was well filled with staples; the garden yielded something.

But the providing of food was not Templin's chief concern. He had suffered a sort of degradation. He had cooked often, but never for strangers, and he had never thought of doing so regularly. He began to believe that Lisbeth's look of wonder had been provoked by his readiness to serve in a menial capacity.

Well, he himself had wondered. But at least it kept him doing something, kept his mind occupied part of the time, kept him from harboring morose thoughts. And yet he could not entirely escape such thoughts.

He had no definite aim in life. He had never

thought of having any aim. Take Meeder. He was doing something. Meeder had a place in nature's scheme of things. He was a worker. Look what he was doing for Stanton. Curing him, bringing him back to life.

There must be interest in that sort of thing. At least it was quite different from taking life. It was like helping to create life. There must be a thrill in it. It would be vastly different from the terrible depression that always seized him after killing a man. Of course he had never betrayed his feelings to anybody. That would n't be playing the game.

And he had never killed in pure wantonness. But no matter what his motives, he had been a destroyer. Meeder created; Meeder constructed. He amounted to something. Yes, despite his big voice and his predilection to make talk when talk was not necessary, Meeder was doing something creditable in the world.

CHAPTER XVI

A CARESS WITHHELD

DAYS were added to those predicted by Meeder. Stanton recovered very slowly. He had regained consciousness; his brain was clear, but he was very weak. Meeder stayed on, not thinking it advisable to desert his patient.

Templin's isolation continued, although the periods when he was left absolutely alone became less frequent. Meeder was out of the sick-room more; Lisbeth found more time to do necessary tasks about the house. But there were hours upon end when Templin was left to his own devices.

He was waiting, waiting. Blaisdell would come. Any day, any hour, might bring him. Templin spent most of his leisure time out in the open, where he could have a clear view of the country. Seated upon a post at a corner of the corral fence he could scan the horizon in search of a dust-cloud that would warn him of the coming of a rider.

Blaisdell would n't come alone. He was n't that kind. Blaisdell knew he would be waiting, and

Blaisdell knew more than one man would be required to take Lisbeth.

Templin took a fierce pride in the knowledge that the outlaw chief respected his prowess. At any rate, even if he was n't like Meeder and some other people, he had done something. He had put fear into the heart of a dangerous man; he was a deterrent, a stumbling-block in Blaisdell's path.

One thing was certain: one of the men he had let off had broken his promise not to return to the cache. He thought it must be Stagg. Stagg had n't seemed sincere that day. Which went to prove that it was foolish to be merciful to some men.

Seated on the top of the fence-post this morning, Templin was scanning the country northward. His feet were resting on a rail; his knees were drawn up, his elbows were resting on them, and his chin was in his cupped hands. He was in plain view from one of the windows of the sick-room.

Lisbeth stood at the window. She was watching Templin and wondering. Meeder walked to the window, stood for an instant beside Lisbeth, and saw Templin.

"Interesting, is n't he?"

"I—I suppose so. I had n't thought of him in that way. He seems to be terribly lonesome."

"Naturally he would be lonesome. That man

would be lonesome in a crowd. He 's that type. He 's a sort of self-sufficient cuss."

"Oh, do you think so? Doctor, I had a different impression of him. It has always seemed to me that he broods much and does n't wish to be bothered."

"Well, he gets his wish. Folks don't bother him. It is n't safe."

"Then he really is as dangerous as people say?"

"Quite. But I have a different opinion of him than most people. He has a reputation for cruelty. I do not know of one instance which would prove that. On the contrary, I do know of many incidents which prove otherwise.

"I think that at heart Templin is n't so bad. But he 's been in bad company. He 's just one of those fellows who don't think or don't care. It is my opinion that Templin got started wrong and is too stubborn to reform. He thinks, because I 've seen him sit for hours as he is sitting now. Meditating or brooding, I don't know which."

He told her of the conversation he had had with Templin while riding toward the Last Hope, before they had met Philippe Mendezo. He quoted Templin's words, which had stuck in his memory:

" 'There 's a chance for an argument there, doc. Suppose a man 's better off dead. Suppose he 's

done a lot of things in his life and has n't the grit to reform. And suppose his punishment for his sins is awaiting, that it is dead sure certain he 's going to be paid for what he 's done. And suppose there 's an innocent party going to suffer if it becomes known that he 's sinned?'

"He was n't referring to himself, I think," Meeder went on, "for a little later he added that the innocent in his family had died long ago. You see, he was thinking of some other person; he was considering the effect of some one's crime upon the innocent."

Lisbeth knew that in that conversation Templin had been referring to her father. She had overheard him speaking to himself as he had closed the door of her father's room, when he had said, "Damn your hide, Stanton, you ought to suffer!"

Strangely contradictory were this man's moods. He had been convinced that Stanton was being deservedly punished, and yet he had ridden into Wilcox for the doctor, when he knew the sheriff was waiting for him, to arrest him for a crime he had not committed; which had been committed by the man he was serving by riding into danger.

Also, knowing what he knew about Stanton, no doubt convinced of his crime against Blaisdell, he had ridden into what he had been pleased to call hell to rescue him. And he had returned, to depre-

cate his feat, saying that it had n't been anything.

"So you see," said Meeder, interrupting her thoughts, "basically Templin has the makings of a man. He 's a thinker; he is brave. I think he proved the latter by riding to Blaisdell's cache after your father."

Lisbeth started, paled. She did not look at Meeder.

"So you know, also?" she said.

"Your father has been doing a lot of talking, Miss Stanton. That is, he did a lot of talking before he went under the anesthetic. We doctors know much more than we ever tell. Remember that, Miss Stanton."

He was silent for an instant. Then he went on: "I think, in view of the fact that Templin is charged with killing Putt and Barkwell, he did a mighty fine thing in going to Blaisdell's cache. There is n't one man in a thousand that would have the courage to do it."

Lisbeth looked straight at Meeder.

"Doctor, I believe you like Templin," she said.

"I can admit that with some pride," answered Meeder. "There 's more real man in him than there is in a good many men who think they are better. Understand, I do not admire his profession. I think he really ought to be hanged. But just the

same, if he had got started right, he would have made a lovable character."

Meeder looked out of the window at Templin, who still sat on the fence-post.

"What I can't understand is why he keeps hanging around here?" he said.

A faint red stained Lisbeth's cheeks.

"He was charged with killing Putt and Barkwell," she said. "You already know that. He came here to escape Norton. He said all the trails were guarded and that he could n't get out of the country."

"Why did n't he go back to his gang—with Blaisdell?"

Lisbeth told him of the coming of Kelton, Givins, and Stagg; and how Templin had shot Kelton.

"I see," said Meeder. "I could n't connect your father's story. He said some one had tried to abduct you. So that 's how it was. Well, it looks as though in going to the cache Templin took more of a risk than I thought. He 's staying here because he can't get away. Well, he 'll try it some day, and that will be the end of him. I 'll be sorry to hear it, too. But 'they who live by the sword must perish by the sword.' "

Meeder turned from the window and went to his patient. He said something about the prospects of his being able to leave Stanton in a day or two.

Lisbeth did not hear him. She stood at the window watching Templin. Meeder's words, "Well, he 'll try it some day, and that will be the end of him," had affected her strangely. She had expected Templin would go away; she had asked him to go; she believed she had wished him to go.

But now that Meeder had predicted his going she was suddenly oppressed with a strange, premonitory conviction that she was n't going to be pleased when Templin rode out of her life.

She left Meeder with her father and went downstairs. She stood for some minutes at the foot of the stairs, in the living-room, gazing at the door of Templin's bedroom. She went to a window and saw Templin still sitting on the fence-post. He was still in the same position, staring northward.

She went into his room and made up the bed. He had straightened the counterpane and pillows, crudely, in man fashion. But his efforts betrayed his instinct toward cleanliness, and she smiled a little.

He had disturbed nothing; the room was as it had been when she had turned it over to him. She swept it, dusted it. Then she saw that he had left his vest hanging on one of the posts of the bed. She took it off, intending to hang it in the wardrobe in a corner.

An oblong bit of cardboard dropped out of one of the pockets of the garment and fell upon the bed. She paused, amazed; for her own face stared up at her, the eyes mutely questioning her as though they doubted the propriety of this strange proceeding.

The picture was one she had had taken since coming West. It had occupied a position of honor on the dresser in her father's room. Her cheeks flamed as she picked it up and stood there looking at it.

But strangely there was no resentment in her heart for the thief. He probably had taken it on the very first day; when he had changed his clothing in her father's room.

For a few minutes longer she held the photograph, studying the eyes that gazed serenely back at her. Then, her face crimson, she restored the picture to the pocket, hung the vest in the wardrobe, and went out of the room.

Five minutes later she was walking down along the corral fence toward Templin. Her eyes were luminous, but her lips were set in severe lines. She approached very close to Templin before he noticed her. When he did he started, slipped down from the post, and smiled.

"You scared me, comin' along so easy," he said. "I must have been dreaming."

"You have been sitting on that post the greater part of the morning," she charged. "You may tell me why, if you please."

"Watchin' the country," he answered truthfully. "An' wonderin' if the mountains ever get tired of stayin' there."

The last was a lie. He had been thinking of Lisbeth, of Stanton, of Meeder, of Blaisdell, and of himself.

Templin had merely postponed his own death. But he could n't understand why there had been a delay. It might just as well have happened the night he had gone to the cache. Was Providence postponing the event out of pure maliciousness?

Blaisdell's men would kill him sooner or later. Lisbeth was certain to fall into Blaisdell's power. If he killed Blaisdell before he himself was killed, Lisbeth would go to the other outlaws. She could n't get away. It would be folly to attempt to escape.

He knew the country as well as any one knew it, and if there had been a chance to get Lisbeth away he would have tried long before this. But Fate had a queer way of running things. There was no telling what might happen. He 'd simply have to stick around.

"I 've been thinking the same thing about you,

Templin," said Lisbeth. "Do you never get tired of staying here?"

"I reckon not. This place suits me as well as any other."

"But what do you expect to do here?"

"Just stay."

"Always?"

He smiled. "'Always' is a long time. Maybe I 'll get tired of stayin' before then."

"And then?"

"I reckon I 'll drift."

Again she was assailed with the queer sensation of approaching loss, of nameless regret. The thought of his drifting with no definite aim and with no thought of a final destination was strangely disturbing. She felt that she ought to know what he intended doing with his life, where he meant to spend the remainder of it, and how he intended to deal with the world.

She was certain she did n't love him; of course she could n't love him! But he had shown that he loved her, and therefore she would always be interested in knowing what he was making of himself.

Moreover, she did n't want him to go away feeling that she was n't interested in him. For even though he was an outlaw he had done much for her, and she was sincerely grateful.

"You 'll drift—where?"

"I don't know. I reckon I 'll land some place."

"Shall you go East?'

"I don't know."

"But you came from the East!"

"Therefore I ought to go back?" He smiled mirthlessly.

"Well, yes; I think you should," she said firmly. "You came from there. You have done nothing with your life out here. I think you ought to go back and try to begin over. With a little patience you ought to succeed."

"I don't think I 'll ever go back."

"If you don't mind my telling you, Templin, I think you are just the least bit obstinate. You don't want to—be—" She paused. She had been going to add "worthy." She did not know why. Her lack of composure frightened her, amazed her.

She felt like quarreling with him because she resented his indifference, his lack of reformatory spirit. He could be different if he tried. But he would not try; he would not even promise!

"To be what?" he asked.

"To be honest and upright!" she said with a vehemence that startled her. "It seems you prefer to stay out here making a fool of yourself rather

than go back where you belong and try to make a man of yourself!"

Well, she was going to quarrel with him now, and she did n't care. Words leaped to her lips; she stood straight and rigid and looked at him with accusing eyes.

"Templin," she said, "I think you have always been disobedient and wilful. It is my opinion that you are one of those men who, if they can't have their way about a thing, won't have anything to do with it. You 've been in the habit of pitying yourself, of feeling injured when other people did n't do what you wanted them to do, or when your advice was rejected. You brood over things too much when you ought to be doing something worth while. You spend your time thinking mean thoughts when you ought to be working at some honest task. Think of a big, healthy, strong man like you running around with a lot of outlaws!"

He looked once at her while she was speaking.

She had spirit. She had the maternal instinct. That was the way his mother might have talked to him if she had lived, and if she could have known what he had done with his life.

If he had heard that sort of talk earlier in life, or if he had not had a stepmother who had n't cared, an elder brother who had tried to dominate him, a

father who had seemed to hate him, he might have profited.

But at that he could n't blame them. He knew the difference between right and wrong now. There was no excuse. He could n't deny the things Lisbeth was saying to him. She was right.

The wonder of the thing was that she was taking so much interest in him. She did n't have to. It was n't necessary for her to urge him to change his habits of life.

She was that kind of a girl, though. He had known from the beginning that she was that kind. Square clear through. Loyal. She wanted everything to go right. She wanted every one to be honest.

He would have thanked her and ridden away at this minute if it was n't that Blaisdell had threatened to come for her. As it was, he had to stay and take what was coming to him.

"You have been a gentleman, Templin," she added. Her face was pale and she was now more composed, although her eyes were flashing with indignation.

"How can you tell?" he asked quietly.

"Because I saw you when you were your natural self, when you were dressed in father's clothes and forgot for a little while to act as a heathen!" she

declared. "Why don't you always be like that?"

He looked straight at her, laughed, and leaped to the top of the post, where he settled again into his former position; his elbows on his knees, his chin cupped in his hands.

Much good it had done to quarrel with him! She had n't got behind the barrier of his reserve; she was as far as ever from gaining his confidence. And that was why she had quarreled with him. She knew that now.

She had wanted to know more about him; she had wanted to listen to him as he told her about his past life, about his aims and ambitions during the days when life had been interesting to him, when he had been eager and credulous and had had illusions. She would have been able to judge him then; she might have got an illuminating glimpse of his character.

But he had held her off, had turned toward her the hard mask of sophistication and indifference. He had passed the day when any woman might have got his confidence.

And she was sorry. She felt defeated, baffled, hurt. Looking at him as he sat on the top of the post, noting the calm serenity of his eyes, with a strange half-amused, half-ironical gleam in them, she did n't know whether she wanted to box his ears

or hug him. With a feeling of dismay for the uncertainty that gripped her she realized that she wanted to do both!

She turned from him quickly and went into the house. Pausing just inside the kitchen door, her face flaming, her breath coming fast, she looked back at him. She knew now what she wanted to do. She wanted to hug him!

She wanted to hold him close to her while she told him that he must stop being an outlaw; that he must so shape his life that she could be proud of him, so that she would not be ashamed to stand by his side and tell other men that he was not really bad, but that he had not been given a fair start in life, and that there was still hope for him.

CHAPTER XVII

MARKING TIME

AT breakfast the following morning Meeder announced that Stanton was definitely convalescent.

"He 's weak, and will be in that condition for a few days. But otherwise you would never know that anything had happened to him. He does not remember the incidents of the past few days." The doctor looked at Lisbeth and smiled.

She said, "Thank you, Dr. Meeder," and glanced at Templin.

Templin had not slept much. Half a dozen times during the night he had got up, dressed himself, and gone outside. But his unceasing vigil had apparently not affected him. Certainly his face showed no signs of worry.

He did not look around when Meeder spoke; he was busy at the stove, and he kept his back to the doctor and Lisbeth. He did not catch the glance Lisbeth directed at him. Seemingly he was not interested.

"I 'll be going back to Cochise soon," announced Meeder. "Maybe to-day. I 've been away longer now than I should have been."

"The trails are in good shape," said Templin, not turning his head. "I 've been thinkin' that maybe it would be a pretty good idea for Miss Stanton to go to Cochise with you, doc. She 's been holed up here for quite a while. A ride over there would n't hurt her health any."

"Thank you, Templin," said Lisbeth. He could feel her gaze on his back. "My health is very good, I assure you. I sha'n't leave father. I shall not go anywhere until he is well again."

It was just as well, Templin supposed. He doubted that she would reach Cochise if she did decide to follow his advice. That trail would be guarded, too. He turned and looked at Meeder.

"Doc," he said, "I 've been thinkin' that maybe a change of scene would do Stanton good. Say Cochise. Or Wilcox. I reckon by takin' things easy we could make it."

"Positively not!" declared Meeder. "A ride that far would kill him!"

Meeder had always been a fool. He always did his talking before taking thought. Invariably. That was Meeder's one great fault. If he had been in the habit of weighing his words he perhaps might

have looked at Templin before speaking; and if he had done so he could not have failed to see the slight wink that had agitated Templin's eyelash as he had made his suggestion.

Staying on at the Last Hope when there was a chance of getting through to one of the two towns would be foolishness. Capture for Lisbeth was inevitable if she continued to stay here.

Blaisdell could not bring all his men to the Last Hope; he would have to divide them in order to guard all the trails. A fight was inevitable, of course, but on one of the trails the odds would not be so great.

Templin made no more suggestions. After breakfast Meeder went again to see his patient. Lisbeth followed him, to return about half an hour later.

The breakfast dishes had been washed and put away. Templin was sitting in one of the chairs on the veranda cleaning and oiling his rifle.

For an instant Lisbeth stood in the kitchen door, watching him. Perhaps she would not have been interested had it not been for a certain grimness in Templin's expression as he worked with the weapon.

"Templin," she said, "this is the second time in

two days that you have cleaned that rifle. What do you expect to do with it?"

"I 'm expectin' to keep it clean."

"Do you expect to use it?"

"Sure; that 's what a rifle is for."

"When do you expect to use it?"

"Oh, most any time. You never can tell when a rifle will come in handy."

"Then you are merely preparing for an emergency. Is that it?"

"I reckon."

"Do you expect an emergency soon?"

"Shucks, ma'am; how can I tell that?"

"Oh," she said; "so you can't tell! But perhaps you can tell me why you were so eager to have me go to Cochise with Dr. Meeder."

"Was I eager?"

"I think you were."

"Shucks," he drawled; "so you was payin' that much attention to me! I thought you was watchin' Meeder pretty close."

He heard the screen-door slam. He did not look around. He was n't jealous of Meeder. Meeder was n't the sort a man could be jealous over. Lisbeth had been crowding him pretty close; she had been too insistent. He had had to drive her away

before she began to suspect something. He had chosen the first weapon he had thought of. It had answered its purpose.

But he was afraid she already suspected. He had n't looked at her, but he had felt the searching, probing glances she had directed at him. She was a wise girl. A man could n't fool her much. But he would n't tell her what impended. No use in trying to get her to desert her parent.

He finished cleaning the rifle, carried it into the kitchen, and set it in a corner against the wall. He looked once at Lisbeth's rifle hanging from its pegs but was afraid he would arouse her curiosity if he went near it. For she was watching him, while pretending to be interested in the dishes in the cupboard.

He went outside, fed the horses in the stable, stood for some time at a little distance from the windmill watching the wheel slowly revolve in the slight breeze. After a while he walked down along the corral fence to the corner post where he had been spending much of his time. He gravely regarded the post.

He could n't sit there again. Lisbeth would begin to suspect. He gazed northward, toward the black, rugged hills that featured the sky-line. Intervening was the desert, its gray floor dead, dry, baking in

a sun that poured down from a white, shimmering sky. A startling contrast to the Last Hope garden where the pale green dwarfed vegetation struggled for life.

Desolation engulfed the Last Hope; in spite of Stanton's efforts desolation would continue to engulf it. Templin knew ranches that were set down in grass-plains, in valleys, in fertile flats where things would grow. Where there was water, life. Here everything was dead. A man, any man, was a fool who would settle in a place like this.

Last Hope. Well, Stanton had aptly named it. It was Stanton's last hope; it would be his. It was his. He had elected to cast his lot with Stanton. If he did succeed in getting away he 'd never be anything but what he was. For a time he had hoped. But not now.

He had n't expected Lisbeth to like him, and he did n't know whether he had expected her to treat him with the consideration she accorded other men. When he had come here he had meant to try to earn her good will. He had failed.

There was n't anything he could do to make himself worthy; he had gone too far. He saw that; he knew it. But still it was better for him to have tried to keep Blaisdell from getting her than to have stayed with Blaisdell. He 'd taken one step in the

right direction, anyway, even though he never took another.

He turned, to see Lisbeth standing in the kitchen door motioning to him. He walked to the edge of the veranda, and she told him that her father wanted to see him.

"He 's been asking for you. Dr. Meeder says talking won't hurt him any now."

He went into the house and up the stairs. Meeder was standing at the door of Stanton's room, and he grinned at Templin and stepped aside to let him pass.

"He 's coming along all right," said the doctor. "But don't excite him."

Stanton was sitting up in bed. He was the Stanton he had been when Templin had first seen him in that very room. He was thinner, and his face was pale and slightly drawn. But he was calm and cool, and in his eyes was the serenity of reason.

He smiled at Templin and motioned him to sit in a chair near the side of the bed.

"Meeder has told me that you rode to Wilcox for him. I want to thank you for that. It seems I have not been myself for several days. Meeder says I was lucky to get out of the affair with my

life. But I don't remember what happened. I was just opening the screen-door to go into the house when everything turned black before me. I remember that there were three men visiting us. What happened?"

"Lisbeth has n't told you?"

"No."

Templin related what had occurred. Stanton listened interestedly. His face grew paler when Templin told him how one of the men had seized Lisbeth. His eyes gleamed vindictively as Templin spoke of the killing of Kelton.

"That 's all, eh?" he questioned when Templin concluded.

"That seems to be plenty."

Stanton's eyes were a perplexed expression. During a silence he gravely watched Templin.

"It seems to me that something else happened, Templin," he said. "Have we had any visitors besides Dr. Meeder, the sheriff's posse, and Kelton and his men?"

"None."

"That is strange. I won't argue with you, of course, for you ought to know. But I have a vague impression that during the last few days I had a talk with a man named Jefford."

"You took me for Jefford," said Templin.

Stanton started, shrank back. His eyes gleamed with an anxious light.

"You!" he said. "I thought you were Jefford? I must have been out of my mind, Templin. I once knew a man named Jefford, but he has been dead many years." He kept his gaze on Templin, searchingly.

"Did I say anything to you while under the impression that you were Jefford?"

"Yes. I reckon you ought to know what you said, Stanton. That is, if you think you can stand it."

"Go ahead. I can stand anything. Tell me everything."

Templin told him. When the recital was completed Stanton's gaze had dropped from Templin; he sat silent, his shoulders sagging, staring at the coverlet. Templin, his face expressionless, watched him.

At last Stanton looked up.

"Templin, what do you think of me?" he asked.

"I 'm not a judge. The question is: what do you think of yourself? If you are satisfied, I am."

"I 'm not guilty, Templin! I swear before God and man that I am not! What you have related is true in effect. Blaisdell was ruined. His wife and

daughter died of starvation. But I had nothing to do with it; I did not know it had happened until afterward. Then it was too late to do anything without facing Blaisdell, and I could n't do that. I suppose I was a coward. I left everything to Jefford. I had confidence in him. I did n't know anything about it. Before Jefford died he wrote me a letter confessing his guilt. He had engineered the whole thing. He admitted having forged my name half a dozen times. If I had that letter here I could prove my innocence. But the letter got lost. I 've torn the place up trying to find it."

"So you told Blaisdell," said Templin.

"I told him!" exclaimed Stanton. "Why, man I have n't seen Blaisdell in twenty years!"

"You saw him without knowin' it, Stanton."

"Good God! Why did n't he kill me?"

"I reckon it was n't your time," said Templin. He told Stanton of what had happened at the cache, and for a few minutes Stanton was silent while he stared incredulously at his informant.

"You saved me, Templin!" he said, his voice almost a whisper.

"I brought you back. That was easy. Blaisdell said he did n't want to be revenged upon a crazy man. He said he 'd wait until you got over it."

"That means he intends to come after me again;

it means he was n't convinced about what I said about Jefford writing me a letter?"

"I reckon it 's his intention to come again."

"How long ago did that happen, Templin?"

"About a week ago."

Stanton was silent again. He stared at Templin, studied his face intently.

"Templin," he said at last, "do you believe me guilty?"

"You could n't be Lisbeth's father an' be guilty of a thing like that, Stanton."

"Does Lisbeth know? Did I tell her what I told you?"

"She knows. The day you told me she was outside the door, listening. I reckon she was afraid to go away an' leave me alone with you."

"What does she say, Templin? Call her! Tell her I want to see her!"

Templin got up. He walked half-way to the door, turned and strode to Stanton's side. "I 'm callin' her in," he said. "There 's some things she should n't be told. One of them is that Blaisdell is intendin' to come here after her; the other is what happened at Blaisdell's cache. You 're man enough to keep her from worryin'."

"Templin, I 'll never be able to thank you enough.

But perhaps I have already done something for you. You remember the day you came here? I stood behind you with a gun at your ribs. I intended to kill you. I knew you were an outlaw; I had heard that you belonged to Blaisdell's band. I had already killed two of Blaisdell's men—Putt and Barkwell. I had got a crazy notion that I could wipe out the whole band. I 'll never know why I did n't kill you as you stood there in front of the glass. But I think it was because I got a look at your face as it was reflected in the mirror. Anyway, I did n't kill you. I thank God I did n't. Why do you suppose I spared you?"

"I 've had notions like that, Stanton. I reckon it was n't to be."

"No; I don't think it was just a notion, Templin. I 'd been talking to Lisbeth before I went up-stairs. There was something in her eyes that told me not to kill you. Templin, what are your feelings toward Lisbeth?"

"I reckon I love her."

"Honestly, honorably?"

"I don't have to answer that, Stanton."

"No, you don't. I was a fool to mention it. You 've proved yourself many times. What does Lisbeth think of you?"

Templin thought of what Lisbeth had said to him while they had stood near the post of the corral fence where he had kept his vigil.

"I reckon her thoughts ain't very complimentary, Stanton."

"She can't think much of either of us, Templin," said Stanton. "We can't blame her. Neither of us is worthy of a charitable thought from her."

"You 're right," agreed Templin. And he added gravely, "I ain't expectin' any."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ENEMY APPEARS

TEMPLIN stayed away from the house the remainder of the day. From a distance, shortly after his talk with Stanton, he saw Lisbeth come out upon the veranda, sink into a chair, and cover her face with her hands. A frown wrinkled Templin's brow; he stared glumly at the earth at his feet. He divined that Lisbeth had just left her father, that Stanton had repeated to her the story of his cowardice and negligence.

It was a mean thing for her to have to hear. Any daughter would be grief-stricken over a thing like that. Any daughter like Lisbeth, who wanted things to go right in the world. Still Stanton had really done nothing wrong. He had been weak; that was all.

Nearly all men were weak; all had defects; not one was perfect. Blaisdell himself, having been sinned against, was now sinning against others. Against an innocent girl. Even if Stanton were guilty Blaisdell would have no right to direct his

vengeance against Lisbeth, to make her suffer for something she had no knowledge of.

There was no charity of thought, no such a thing as one human tolerating another's weaknesses. What was the use of thinking square thoughts? Nobody else did! Except Lisbeth.

Before dawn the next morning Templin saddled the black horse he had ridden to the cache and went circling the Last Hope buildings. He wanted to take a look at the surrounding country before Blaisdell and his men swooped down upon him.

He followed the course of Big Sandy for several miles. In the main the stream was nothing but a run. Here and there was a wide, shallow pool, but in many places he could have jumped across. There were spots where the banks of the stream, not more than five or six feet high, were so smooth and perpendicular that they gave the impression of having been sliced downward with a great knife.

Veins of adobe mud, now baked dry by the sun, had fallen inward from the banks to the bottom of the river-bed. Slabs and chunks of the clay that had fallen in previous seasons were disintegrating, crumbling. Sand, dead and dry except in the center where the water moistened it, stretched in fantastic windrows between the banks.

There were occasional stretches of trees and brush. In places they grew thickly, forming coverts. There were other stretches where rock formations rose high above the river banks. Riders endeavoring to move without being seen could follow the bed of the river. The sand was hard and dry.

Templin was abroad for more than two hours. Mentally he recorded the location of every sand-dune, every gully, every clump of brush. The knowledge might do him some good.

When he returned to the ranch-house he saw Lisbeth standing at the edge of the veranda talking with Meeder. Both were very much in earnest, for the doctor was leaning toward Lisbeth, while she was standing very rigid. They were so intent upon their conversation that they did not see Templin until he was very close to them. Then Meeder called to him.

"You 're riding early," he said. "That 's just my style."

"So you 're goin' back to Cochise," said Templin. He rode closer and observed that Meeder's face was redder than usual, that Lisbeth's cheeks were paler. There was something in the expression of her eyes that caused him to think she was violently agitated and was trying to conceal it from him.

"Yes, going back," answered Meeder. "There 's

nothing more for me to do here. Stanton will get along; there 's no more danger."

Templin looked straight at him.

"So-long, doc," he said. "You 've sure studied your medicine books. Look out for that quicksand we crossed comin' out."

"Thank you," said Meeder.

Templin rode his horse to the corral, not waiting to witness the doctor's parting with Lisbeth.

Something had gone wrong. But it seemed to be between Lisbeth and Meeder. It was n't his affair.

All morning he had been considering the question of having Meeder ride to Wilcox instead of Cochise, to ask Sheriff Norton to bring a posse to the Last Hope. But that had seemed to him to be a rather unwarranted and panicky proceeding.

He had never heard of the law acting in a preventative way; it seemed the law never anticipated. After a crime had been committed the law would act. Then it was usually too late.

Blaisdell might not come. He did n't want to call upon Norton and make himself ridiculous in case nothing happened. Yet he would risk ridicule for Lisbeth. But if Blaisdell did n't bring his entire band with him he could handle the situation without help.

He turned when he heard Meeder ride away,

opened his lips to call to him, closed them again, waved a hand to him, and turned the black horse into the corral.

That was settled. He felt guilty, because he had not done what he could to save Lisbeth. But he had no faith in Norton; perhaps that lack of faith had been at the bottom of his reluctance to call upon the man.

He had sat on the veranda, posing as Lanning, when he had heard Norton declare he was glad he did n't have to trail Templin any further. If Norton was afraid of Templin would he have the courage to come to the Last Hope to fight the dangerous men that Blaisdell would bring?

Anyway, it was too late now. He would n't ride after Meeder; he would n't confess that he wanted help. He 'd fight it out with Blaisdell alone.

Lisbeth watched Meeder ride away. Without seeming to notice Templin again, she went into the house. He walked down the corral fence and leaped to the top of the post where he had kept vigil for many days.

He had not been sitting there for more than ten minutes, when, scrutinizing the country northward, he observed a thin cloud of dust trailing off westward. He shifted his position so that he could watch the cloud.

It was moving slowly toward the Last Hope.

For half an hour he continued to watch the dust-cloud. It grew larger in his vision; it moved steadily toward him. He drew a deep breath; his lips straightened into grim lines.

Blaisdell was coming. Even if he had told Meeder to send Norton, the posse would have arrived too late. He slipped off the post, strode slowly to the house, crossed the veranda, and stood in the kitchen door.

Lisbeth heard him, looked inquiringly at him.

He grinned at her.

"It 's time to clean that rifle again," he said. "There 's no tellin' when I might have to use it."

He went into his room, got the weapon, smiled again at Lisbeth, and strode out.

CHAPTER XIX

TWO TO ONE

TEMPLIN went into the stable. He found a crevice in the heavy planking of a stall large enough for the barrel of the rifle. He made note of other crevices in the walls that could be used as loopholes in case Blaisdell's men surrounded the stable.

He did n't want to draw the fire of the outlaws toward the house. The stable was n't very far away from the house; it was easily within rifle-shot, and he felt certain none of the outlaws could reach the house.

Having decided upon his plan of defense, he went out again, stood beside the corral fence watching the approaching dust-cloud.

It had come nearer; it was still traveling steadily. It was not more than half a dozen miles out. Nor was it as large as he expected it would be. Not many men could be riding in a cloud of that size. Not more than three or four, he thought.

The cloud drew nearer. When once it flattened

he could see the forms of two men above it. He watched attentively, his gaze bitter. Only two! Blaisdell meant to sacrifice two men. That was it. Unless others were coming from different directions he was not going to have such a hard time of it. Not to-day, at least.

But he could n't afford to take any chances, with Lisbeth depending upon him. He scrutinized the country in all directions. There were no signs of any other riders. He examined the mechanism of the rifle, made certain there was a cartridge in the firing-chamber.

He did n't intend to use the weapon unless the riders showed some signs of hostility while still at a distance, for he had never shot any man who had shown that his intentions were peaceable. He held the rifle, though, until he saw Lisbeth watching him from a window of the kitchen. Then he set it against the fence.

He became curious about the two riders. Were they Blaisdell's Riders after all? A man could n't be too sure what Blaisdell might attempt. From what he knew of the character of the men of the outlaw band it seemed strange that two of them should think they would be a match for him. Kelton, Tolver, and Blaisdell himself were the only members of the band that had ever betrayed any

inclination to clash with him; they were the only ones who could hope to match the quickness of his draw.

Blaisdell was tricky; there were other gun-fighters in the country, and Blaisdell might have hired two of them in the hope of himself avoiding a difficult and dangerous job.

Obeying a sudden whimsical impulse, Templin took up the rifle, walked to the veranda, crossed it, and again entered the house. He set the rifle in a corner of the kitchen, smiled at Lisbeth, who was silently watching him, and walked into the living-room toward the stairs.

Lisbeth's voice halted him.

"The rifle don't need cleaning after all," she said.

"No. I reckon I 'm gettin' too fussy."

"Oh!" she said. She turned her back to him. He entered the living-room and went up the stairs. He remembered seeing field-glasses in Stanton's room. He went down the hall, opened the door of Stanton's room, and peered inside.

Stanton appeared to be sleeping. Templin stepped inside, found the field-glasses on the dresser, took them, and silently went out of the room. He opened another door that led from the hall, and found himself in a bedroom which, judging from the furnishings, was Lisbeth's.

A window in the room faced the north. Templin raised the shade a little, knelt on the floor, and focused the glasses upon the two riders.

He looked long, intently. The men were strangers to him. One was tall, the other short. The glasses had brought their faces close to him, and he had no liking for them. They were perhaps two miles distant, and they were talking. Their faces were serious, but at times the taller man smiled craftily.

Once, while Templin watched, they halted their horses, drew the heavy six-shooters they wore, and examined them.

Templin lowered the glasses and drew down the shade. He stole back along the hall to Stanton's room, replaced the glasses, and stood for a brief space looking at Stanton.

Stanton was asleep. Templin went to the wardrobe, took from the hangers the herring-bone suit he had worn once before, the gray felt hat, and the low shoes. Swiftly he changed, putting his cowboy regalia in the wardrobe. He had no trouble finding collar and necktie.

Presently he was arrayed as when he had talked that day on the veranda with Norton. He was the same as then with one slight exception. Over the

herring-bone coat and around his waist he had strapped his cartridge-belt and six-shooter.

Odd he looked, to say the least, he decided, as he gazed at his reflection in the glass of the dresser. The cartridge-belt and six-shooter seemed glaringly out of place; they were as incongruous, as conspicuous as a cow-puncher in full plains equipment walking the streets of an Eastern city. Templin's eyes glinted. He looked tenderfoot. Inexpressibly effete.

It was remarkable what a change the tailored clothing made in his appearance. He almost doubted his own identity. Even Blaisdell would have to look long at him before he would recognize him. But Blaisdell, he felt, would recognize the black-handled gun at his hip and the well-worn cartridge-belt sagging low.

He stepped into the bath-room, washed his face, and combed his hair. Then setting the felt hat comfortably on his head he descended the stairs.

Lisbeth heard him enter the kitchen; turned, gasped.

"Merciful Heavens, Templin!" she said. "How you frightened me! What made you put on those things again? Is Norton coming?" Her eyes had widened with joy.

He saw the joy go when he shook his head. He marveled. Was she hoping Norton would come after him?

"Norton is n't coming," he answered quietly. "It seems there is no such luck for you. Two riders are coming across the desert from the north. They will be here presently. I looked them over with the glasses from a window of your room. They are strangers to me.

"I suppose I should have told you before that when I visited Blaisdell in his cache he threatened to come here again. Blaisdell is not one of the two riders who are coming, but I have a suspicion that he has sent them. I don't want them to know that I am Templin. When those men come I want you to address me as Lawrence Lanning, a friend of your father, who has not been in the West more than two or three weeks. You can promise that, I presume?"

"Yes; yes!" she said, staring at him. "Of course!" Her eyes were aglow. "What a difference they make!" she added, referring to his Eastern attire. "I would never know you were Templin! And your speech, Templin—Lanning, I mean! You change it when you change your clothing, don't you?" She clasped her hands tightly together.

"Oh, if you were only not Templin!" she said. "If you really were Lanning!"

A great light leaped into his eyes. But they dimmed and glinted cynically. "Clothes *do* make the man, eh?" he said. "Well, you will find that Templin is more valuable in this country than Lanning."

She shook her head at him but did not answer.

Instead, she ran to a window and looked out into the desert, northward. The two riders were not more than a mile distant. She turned her back to the window and held hard to the sill while she looked searchingly, anxiously at Templin.

"Templin," she whispered, "what does it mean? You have tried to pretend you have not been worried, but I have seen it in your eyes, in your manner. Why did you talk that way to Dr. Meeder about myself and father going to Wilcox? Why have you cleaned your rifle so often, and why have you been sitting on that post so much, watching the desert?"

"I reckon you 've got to know sometime," he said. "Blaisdell 's comin' again."

She caught her breath.

"I knew it," she said. "I felt it! And you think Blaisdell may have sent the men who are now coming?"

"Blaisdell 's tricky. I ain't takin' any chances."

She was anxious, apprehensive. But even at this instant, when she was tortured by the terrible prospect of another visit from the outlaw chief, she could not repress a feeling of wonder over Templin's speech. It had changed again. She felt that whenever danger threatened, that whenever violence was imminent, he reverted to the primitive, using the dialect to which he was accustomed, which had been associated with his deeds as an outlaw.

He went into the living-room, took a magazine from a center-table, and walked out upon the veranda, taking a chair at the far end, where he would be away from the door, and where he could see the corner of the house around which the riders would appear.

He was apparently intensely interested in the magazine when the riders appeared, brought their horses to a halt, and sat silently in their saddles. Not until they had been there for several seconds did Templin look up. Then he pretended to start, and lowered the magazine.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" he said then.

For an instant there was silence. The riders looked at Templin, then at each other. The taller man winked at his companion.

"That 's us," he said to Templin. "We sure

answer that description. But you 've got the advantage of us. We don't remember that we was ever introduced."

"My name is Lanning," said Templin; "Mr. Lawrence Lanning."

The tall man bowed with mock politeness.

"Pleased to meet y'u," he said. He slid off his horse to the edge of the veranda, tossed the reins over the head of the animal, and stood, watching Templin. His companion also dismounted.

The second man was short. He did n't look clean. There was a belligerent gleam in his eyes which instantly antagonized Templin. The eyes were n't clear; they were clouded, squinted, as though the man's thoughts were continually evil.

The tall man's eyes were crafty, insolent. He was too sure of himself, too sarcastic. There was something furtive about him, a probing intentness in his glances. It was as though he sought evil and would be astonished if he found virtue.

"Anybody around?" asked the tall man.

"Miss Stanton is in the house, I believe," replied Templin. "I'll call her if you wish. Mr. Stanton is in his room. He has been ill."

"He hain't!" exclaimed the tall man, seemingly vastly astonished. "Sho! Now that 's too bad! So he 's ill!"

Amused contempt was in the tall man's voice, in his eyes. He watched Templin with the interest one gives to a curiosity that provokes mirth. But he was trying to suppress his mirth; it was as if he did not wish to offend at this minute, but would do so presently, after he became assured that the curiosity at which he gazed was real and not counterfeit.

"Yes, he has been very ill," said Templin. He got out of the chair, walked to the door, and called to Lisbeth.

"Miss Stanton," he said, "here are two visitors."

Lisbeth came to the screen-door, stepped out upon the veranda. From the kitchen she had been watching the two men. She smiled at them.

"How do you do, Lally?" she said to the tall man. "Good morning, Bell," was her greeting to the short one.

The geniality in her eyes vanished; they became steady with reproof.

"Where have you been?" she demanded of the men. "You have n't been in for so long that father thought you had deserted, like the others!"

The tall man answered.

"We got in as soon as we could, ma'am," he said. "Things has been detainin' us. First it was the cattle—which kept disappearin'. We could n't find 'em. Then we got short-handed. The boys kept

leavin'. We could n't hold 'em. One of 'em told us he 'd been offered a better job by Blaisdell. That 's what stumped us, as we sent word. We woke up one mornin' to find out that we did n't have a damned man—askin' your pardon, ma'am. Most of the herd was gone; we could n't find a hair of 'em. When we started back to report we run plumb into Blaisdell an' his bunch. Blaisdell was dead set on havin' us desert, too. But we could n't see it that way an' told him so. He got sort of stirred up an' would n't let us go. Held us prisoners. Said he 'd wait an' argue further with us about it. We got a chance an' sneaked."

"What are we going to do, Lally?" asked Lisbeth.

"That 's what we come to find out, ma'am. There ain't a hoof left. We thought there 'd be no use hangin' around when there was n't no cattle, an' that mebbe we could get our time."

"Certainly," said Lisbeth. "You may have your money whenever you wish. But I thought perhaps you might want to stay around here for a few days. Lally, it looks very much as though Blaisdell is not going to stop with merely stealing the Last Hope cattle. Some days ago some of his men came here and attacked father!"

"You don't say! Ma'am, that don't look very good."

"It does n't. That is why I thought that you might wish to stay here for a few days. There is no telling when Blaisdell will return."

"No, there ain't. That 's a fact." Lally turned and gazed at the corral, at the stable, at the level surrounding the house. At length he looked at Templin, who had returned to the chair upon which he had been sitting, and at last at Lisbeth

"Shucks," he said, "you don't mean there ain't no one around here but you an' your dad—an'—an' this here gentleman?"

"That is all, Lally."

"Nobody else been here?"

"Dr. Meeder. He left this morning."

"Sho."

Lally seemed surprised. He again glanced around. He looked at Bell.

The short man's eyelids flickered; he turned his head.

"Reckon we might stay," said Lally. "We ain't the kind to fan it an' leave a woman unprotected. But when I hesitated, kind of, I thought there was somebody else here. Seems I heard some of Blaisdell's men sayin' that a guy named Templin was here."

"Templin was here," answered Lisbeth.

Since her talk so far with Lally must have made

it clear to Templin that the men were connected with the Last Hope she could not understand why Templin should wish further to conceal his identity. But she supposed his reasons must seem sufficient to him and that she had no choice but to deceive the men.

"But he 's gone now, eh?" said Lally.

"There is no one here—no guest, that is—except Mr. Lanning."

"H-m!" said Lally. "I 'm sort of sorry I missed the cuss. I 've been hearin' about him. Gun-fighter. So he ain't here." He laughed. "Templin 's done, I reckon. Blaisdell 's got all the trails blocked. If Templin tries to ride any of them he 'll get drilled."

"What do you mean, Lally?"

"Just what I said, ma'am." Lally grinned widely. "Blaisdell is intendin' that no one shall escape from the Last Hope."

Something new had come into Lally's eyes. He was bolder, more confident. His voice had a ring of satisfaction.

Lisbeth saw the change in him; she stood very rigid now, very still.

"Lally," she said slowly, "what do you know about Blaisdell's intentions?"

"He was tellin' me." He placed his hands on

his hips, sprawled his legs apart, and grinned widely at the girl. Amazed at the change in him, Lisbeth involuntarily shrank back and stared at him.

"He was tellin' me," repeated Lally. "Mebbe after a while you 'll get the meanin' of that."

"Do you mean that you have deserted us, that you have joined Blaisdell's band, that you lied when you told me you had been forced to stay away until now?"

"I reckon," admitted Lally. "I was n't blurtin' out everything I knowed until I saw how the land laid around here."

Lisbeth's face was ashen. She did not look at Templin. But at this instant she was thanking God that she had not revealed Templin's identity to the men; she was exulting in his caution, in his wisdom, in his cleverness. She felt that if the men meant evil he would find a way to outwit them, though she was aware that she must be very careful lest she do or say something that would precipitate action before Templin willed it.

Although fear chilled her and every bit of breath seemed to have left her body, she managed to smile, contrived to keep her voice steady and her eyes unwavering as she looked at Lally.

"Lally," she said, "I don't believe you. You are merely trying to frighten me. Why, you

could n't join Blaisdell for the purpose of making war upon a woman!"

Lally's gaze dropped. A latent spark of chivalry in him had been touched. He looked at Bell. Bell sneered, and Lally again met Lisbeth's eyes.

"We ain't meanin' no harm to you, I reckon," he said. "We rode over here to drill Templin. He ain't here. I reckon that lets us out. We ain't botherin' you nor your dad."

"Thank you, Lally," said Lisbeth.

She stood, irresolute, breathing fast. She did not believe Lally. She could tell from the brutal expression of Bell's face that he was enraged at Lally, that he longed to force trouble. She did not know what sort of trouble; she was certain the men meditated violence of some kind.

Templin had guessed it. Blaisdell was tricky. Also, Blaisdell was not the man to run into danger when he could employ others to face danger for him. Blaisdell knew Templin was at the Last Hope; he knew he would not leave the ranch until there was no further danger to threaten Lisbeth. He knew that if he came personally to the Last Hope to take Lisbeth the long postponed clash between him and Templin would be precipitated. He had sent Lally and Bell to get Lisbeth.

They meant to take her. Lally had vacillated

for a moment. That was because Lisbeth's courage had shamed him. After a while, when the time for delay had passed, he would act.

Templin shifted his position so that he faced the three. Lisbeth was at his left, in front of the screen-door. Lally was standing near her; Bell was slouching at a distance of several feet. Both men were at Templin's right, and though he looked at Lisbeth he could see the faces of both. He observed that when he turned to look at Lisbeth, Lally shot a quick glance at him, while Bell deliberately crossed his arms over his chest, lifted one hand, and gently caressed his chin.

But Templin apparently paid no attention to the men. His smile when he met Lisbeth's eyes was so reassuring that the girl almost gasped her amazement. How could he be so cool and unconcerned in this crisis?

His eyes were as serene as when she had first looked into them that day when he had ridden to the edge of the veranda and she had told him about Philippe. His movements were as deliberate as then, his self-control as perfect.

Had Lisbeth not seen him in his cowboy rigging she would have accepted him for what he appeared to be at this instant—a polite Easterner forced to

play the eavesdropper, who reluctantly listens and at last feels it his duty to interrupt.

"Pardon me, Miss Stanton," he said gently; "I could not help overhearing you and your guests. It appears something has happened. Can I be of any assistance to you?"

"You can keep a-settin', my friend; keep a-settin'," said Lally.

Apparently, until Lally spoke, Templin had no knowledge of his existence. He now looked at him, and Lally, who had been about to speak further, closed his lips.

To Lisbeth, breathlessly watching, it seemed Lally was fascinated by something he saw in Templin's eyes. He drew a deep breath; his own eyes widened; he stared at Templin as though he saw something in the Eastener that he had not expected to see.

Lisbeth knew what it was: it was the queerly mingled serenity and recklessness of the man; his quiet confidence in himself, that more than once she had felt; his contempt for any force that opposed him.

Lally must have been puzzled. His eyes betrayed him. It was plain that he was having some trouble in trying to classify this man, who, arrayed in

eastern clothing, had the power to so confuse his thoughts.

Bell, also, was affected. On his lips was a smile that seemed to have frozen there. It was set; it had no expression. His eyes were roving jerkily; his gaze, not held like Lally's, was leaping all over Templin. It was as if Bell instinctively recognized Templin's character, but that, as puzzled as Lally, he was trying to reconcile that character with the Eastern clothing.

His gaze finally became fixed upon Templin's gun. He noted the black handle of the weapon, the worn leather of the holster. He felt he had solved the mystery of Templin's strange appearance. It was in the gun and the cartridge-belt. The menace that lingered about Templin was in the worn holster and in the black-handled gun.

"Four-flushin'!" he sneered, giving voice to his thoughts.

Lally started, smiled.

Yes, that was the explanation. Lally laughed outright, insolently.

"Shucks," he said. "Our gentleman is a-talkin', an' a-lookin'. Mr. Lanning, your name is, eh? Well, Mr. Lanning, we 're right sorry to speak so rough to you, but this here affair ain't none of your business. If you don't keep your gab out of this I

reckon we 'll have to talk a heap plainer to you!"

Two things Templin had not forgotten when he had changed his attire. They were a little tobacco-pouch and a package of cigarette-papers. He had placed the tobacco-pouch in a side pocket of the coat he wore; the cigarette-papers were in one of the lower vest pockets.

He seemed unaffected by Lally's insulting speech. Without looking at the man he got to his feet and stood, facing Lally and Bell. His left hand went into the coat pocket. It was withdrawn, the index-finger and the thumb gripping the draw-cord of the pouch, the pouch dangling like an inverted toy balloon.

Silently Lisbeth and Lally and Bell watched Templin. He was doing nothing odd or unusual, was doing a thing that Lally and Bell themselves had done many times. And yet the action seemed to fascinate them; the three watched his every movement as though they were witnessing a feat of legerdemain and were determined to solve it.

Lisbeth was puzzled. Lally and Bell were suspicious. There was a half-sneer on Lally's face; Bell's brutal lips were in a pout.

Templin stood with his legs slightly a-sprawl, his elbows at his sides. His hands were raised slightly, so that they were about on a level with his

chest. He did not appear to know that the three were watching him; seemingly he was devoting his entire attention to the task of untangling the draw-string of the tobacco-pouch.

It was strange how delicately he went about it. There was a lightness in the movements of his fingers that a woman might have envied.

And though the fingers were so steady that they made not one false move as they untangled the knot, Lisbeth began to feel that a crisis impended. Lally and Bell must have had the same feeling.

For Lally's face had paled. His eyes were bright, alert. Bell's pout had gone; his lips were set in straight, cruel lines. His arms, which had been tightly folded across his chest, were now unfolding; they had dropped until they were crossed at the wrists. His fingers were twitching.

Lisbeth felt that she must cry out, must warn Templin that the two men were watching him, that they would shoot him the instant he made a false move. It did not seem possible to her that Templin meditated hostility of any kind, that he could be so foolish as to attempt it. Amazed at his coolness, at his unconcern, at the deliberate slowness of his movements, she almost forgot to breathe as she watched him.

The draw-string of the tobacco-pouch was un-

knotted. Templin opened the mouth of the pouch, shifted his fingers until they grasped the bottom of the pouch. Then, with his left hand holding the pouch, he slid the index-finger and the thumb of his right hand into the lower vest pocket on the right side and drew forth a cigarette-paper.

Again his deft fingers shifted their burden. The tobacco-pouch went into the right hand, the paper into the left. Templin tilted the pouch, and the tobacco began to run into the paper.

"Hell!" sneered Lally, his voice seeming hoarse. "That 's the way you answer a man, is it? You damned Eastern dudes come out here an' try to pull off your high an' mighty airs! I 'm tellin' you you can't get away with it! An' you ain't doin' no smokin' right now! Understand? Drop them damned makin's an' stand up straight like a man!"

For an instant following the issuing of Lally's command there was a silence. Templin looked over the cigarette he was making. He met Lally's gaze, held it. It seemed to Lisbeth that Lally's stiffened; that he again saw something in Templin's eyes that dulled his eagerness for a fight.

Lisbeth saw that something; she analyzed it. It was contempt. Wordlessly he was daring Lally to draw his gun.

At last Lally seemed to understand the look.

He drew a deep breath. And then, just when it seemed that the threatened clash must come, a sound from inside the house shattered the strained stillness.

"Templin!"

It was Stanton's voice. It seemed to come from the living-room.

Lisbeth started, would have turned. Something in Templin's manner dissuaded her. He was still filling the cigarette-paper. It seemed he could not get the proper amount of tobacco into it. There was too much, or too little. He refilled it once more as Lisbeth watched him.

There was a smile on Templin's lips, cynical, mocking. Lally was now watching the door behind Lisbeth. His eyes were wide with astonishment and suspicious inquiry.

"Templin!"

The call came again, this time nearer. A step sounded inside the house. It came nearer; it was startlingly loud in the heavy silence. Then it was at the door.

Stanton, pale, his hair disheveled, appeared behind Lisbeth, his face above her shoulder. His gaze roved from Lisbeth to Lally, and from Lally to Bell. It rested finally upon Templin; there was no mistaking the recognition in his eyes, no doubting that he knew the man at whom he was looking.

"Templin," he said querulously, "why in the devil don't you answer?"

Lally's eyes flamed. His right hand flashed downward.

Bell cursed, crouched.

The cigarette-paper fluttered downward from Templin's hand. It swirled wildly, spasmodically, away from the belching white smoke and crimson fire that started at Templin's side and seemed to halt, alternately, at Lally's chest and at Bell's. It was swept back toward Templin by smoke-streak that appeared to issue from Lally's hip and from Bell's. Then it dropped, landing amid some scattered grains of tobacco on the floor of the veranda.

Bell had pitched off the edge of the veranda. He struck on his right shoulder and turned over so that he lay upon his face. Lally would have seemed to be standing rigid had it not been that his knees appeared to be doubling under him. He sneered at Templin, threw his gun up. Another crimson-dyed streak of white smoke darted from Templin's side,

Lally coughed and pitched forward. His gun dropped from his fingers, clattered to the floor, and lay close to his outstretched fingers, a thin, blue-white streak of smoke spiraling upward from its muzzle.

Templin stood staring downward at the two men.

He sheathed his gun. Then with his right hand he slowly lifted the left and watched a crimson stream that was flowing over the back of the hand toward the finger-tips.

CHAPTER XX

FAINT HEART

THE wound Templin had received was not serious. The bullet had little more than seared the flesh just above the wrist. But Lisbeth insisted upon washing it and binding it up, and he made no objection.

The kitchen, after they had got Stanton back to his room and after Templin had disposed of the men who had sought him, became an inquisitorial rack. Templin was satisfied to feel Lisbeth's deft fingers upon his arm.

Her touch was strangely calming, and as she worked with the bandages he marveled at the thrills that ran over him. Hopeless, of course. But as he sat there he wondered how it would be if he were certain to have her around him forever.

That was absurd. Still, there was no reason why a man should not think about such things, providing he kept his thoughts to himself. And he would do that. He had told Lisbeth how his thoughts were;

he had declared himself on the night he had gone to the cache for Stanton.

He had blundered, had made a fool of himself. He would never be a fool in the same way again. Still, he was aware of the thrills that shot through him. And he stole glances at her when he thought she was n't watching.

At last the bandage was on. Lisbeth moved her chair back and gave him a severe glance.

"Why did n't you tell me Blaisdell threatened to come here again?" she demanded.

"I did tell you."

"Yes, just before Lally and Bell came. Why did n't you tell me before?"

"I reckoned it was n't important."

"Oh! so you reckoned. Did n't you feel that I should have been told?"

"I did n't want to worry you."

"But you did, Templin. Don't you think I have eyes?"

He would have told her that it had been her eyes that he had seen first, if he felt he dared.

He said nothing.

"Perhaps you can conceal your thoughts from men, Templin, as you concealed your intentions from Lally and Bell. But I think a woman cannot be fooled that way."

He was certain of that. The only woman he had ever tried to fool had seen right through him.

"I knew, the morning you came from the cache with father, that something had happened over there which caused you to worry. You were too quiet; you wanted to be alone all the time. You kept cleaning your rifle and sitting on the post staring northward. And this morning, when Dr. Meeder left, you acted as though you wanted to tell him something. Why did n't you?"

He did not answer.

"I know why you did n't tell him what you thought of telling him," she said, her voice gentle and reproving. "It was because you were stubborn —perhaps too proud—to ask for assistance."

"How do you know what I was thinkin' then?" he asked, amazed.

"Because I saw your face, Templin."

He looked sharply at her. "I reckon I understand, now," he said. "You sent for Norton. That was why you an' Meeder were talkin' so confidentially just before he left."

"Yes."

The killing of Lally and Bell had shocked her. She had screamed just once as Templin had reached for his gun there on the veranda, and she had made no other sound during the shooting.

Her cheeks had been ashen all the time she had been working with his wound; she had tottered along the hall when he had taken Stanton up-stairs again. But she had given no other sign of agitation. Most women would now be hysterical. Templin had wondered at her courage. Yet it was not strange that she should reveal courage; she had been brave from the beginning.

Yes, all through everything that had happened. From the time he had seen her sitting on the veranda with the rifle across her knees, watching the door of the cholla-house. She had marvelous self-control.

He was amazed that she was losing that self-control now. For he saw a swift color surge into her face, saw her eyes dim mistily, observed that her lips were quivering, that she caught the lower one between her teeth and tried to keep it steady.

"Shucks," he reproved gently; "don't go to givin' up now. It 's all over. It 's likely Norton's posse will be here before Blaisdell comes."

"Templin," she said, "it is n't that. It was the way you stood on the veranda, facing Lally and Bell. You did n't seem to care what happened to you. Those men had every opportunity to kill you. You dared them. You laughed at them. I want you to promise that you will never take chances like

that again." She shuddered. "What would have happened to me if they had killed you?"

"They did n't kill me," he said. "There 's no use thinkin' of what might have happened."

A wild hope had thrilled him. At first he had thought her concern was for him alone. That would have meant there was foundation for his dreams. Her last words had destroyed the hope.

Hers had been a selfish thought. Well, it was n't unusual for people to be selfish. He was amazed that he still continued to hope; and he sat back in his chair watching her with some bitterness.

Rather abruptly she left him. He could hear her going up the stairs. He went out and stood on the veranda for a few minutes, then walked to the water-trough and sat on its edge. He stared northward, and a smile wreathed his lips. Blaisdell would wait vainly for the return of Lally and Bell.

He reloaded the black-handled gun. Two cartridges had been used on Bell, three on Lally. How transparent the trick he had worked on them! He was satisfied that if it had n't been for the Eastern clothing he wore, the trick would not have succeeded. Lally and Bell would have been more suspicious of him if he had worn his cowboy rigging.

But Lisbeth dominated his thoughts. He sat on the water-trough until noon, thinking of her. At

her call he washed, went into the house, and sat at the table in the kitchen opposite her.

"Father is much better," she told him. "He wants to get up, but I have argued him out of that. If he continues to improve, he may get up for a while to-morrow."

That was the extent of their conversation. Afterward Templin left the table, circled the house, and scanned the country in all directions. There were no signs of riders. Blaisdell would not come until a reasonable lapse of time convinced him that Lally and Bell would not return.

The sun was hot, though it was cool on the veranda. Templin stood for an instant at its edge, then seated himself in the chair he had occupied just previous to the shooting of the two former Last Hope men. He had not been in the chair more than a quarter of an hour when Lisbeth came out, seated herself in another chair facing him, folded her hands in her lap, and looked at him.

He thought she looked strangely calm and quiet; felt that she was studying him. Several times during the rebellious days of his youth there had been school-teachers who had gazed at him as Lisbeth was gazing now; and he had known then, as he knew now, that he was being studied with a view toward the correct method of reproving him.

He had always been a problem; he was a problem to Lisbeth, to himself. His father had looked at him as Lisbeth was looking; his brother had often studied him in the same manner; he had seen Blaisdell watching him with the same expression. He must have seemed odd and unruly to all of them as he must now seem odd to Lisbeth.

"Templin," said Lisbeth suddenly, "do you like to kill people?"

"I 've never got any particular pleasure out of it!"

"But when you shot Lally and Bell—or, rather, just before you shot them—you smiled just as though you were pleased."

"Not because I was intendin' to shoot them," he answered. "I reckon it was because of the way they looked at me. They were n't sure; they did n't know what was goin' to happen. They 'd come here to pull off a mean trick, an' I knew they were n't going to do it. That ought to make a man feel like smilin'."

"Yes, I understand. But to be able to stand there smiling, when you knew that in the next instant you were going to kill them! What kind of a man are you, Templin?"

"I can't tell you that. Just a man, I reckon. I 've never let any one impose on me. I can't stand

around with my hands in my pockets an' see any one else imposed upon."

"That is why you came here, I suppose. You thought we were going to be imposed upon?"

"Something like that."

She was looking straight at him, her wonderfully clear eyes as serene and steady as his own. It seemed to him that she knew his thoughts better than he himself knew them, and that she meant to keep him from suspecting hers. But there were telltale, glowing stains in her cheeks which betrayed the excitement she tried to conceal.

"Templin," she said, "the other day you told me you did n't intend to hold me. You said you were withdrawing what you said about—about marrying me."

"Yes, I said that."

"You know that it takes two to make a bargain, don't you?"

"I reckon."

"That was a one-sided bargain, was n't it?"

"I reckon it was. I lost my head, I expect."

"Oh, then you did n't mean it?"

"I ain't intendin' to try to get somethin' I ain't supposed to get."

"Still, you have been doing that the greater part

of your life, have n't you?" Her voice was low, mocking.

"There 's a difference," he said. He was not looking at her now; he could n't look at her while she mocked him.

"Yes, I suppose there is a difference. Was that the first time you ever proposed to a woman, Templin?"

"I 've never been interested in women," he said gruffly.

"And that was why you were so—so volcanic, I presume? Having had no experience, you thought you could take a woman as you have been in the habit of taking a horse or another man's pocketbook. Is that it?"

"I 've never taken a man's money from him," he denied. He still did not look at her, and the blood surged to his cheeks.

"Well, I 'm glad to hear that. But I suppose there is a difference between taking a horse that belongs to a man and in robbing the man's pocket?"

"Not a lot of difference, I expect," he said. "You need n't rub it in."

"Oh, I am not trying to humiliate you, Templin. What you have done is your affair. If you wish to

keep on robbing people I have no right to criticize you."

"I have n't done such a lot of it."

"Do you mean that you have never liked it?"

"That 's it. I 've been considerin' gettin' out of it."

"How long have you been considering, Templin?"

"For quite a while."

"Since you first came to the Last Hope?"

"Before that."

"How long before?"

"Quite a while."

She was silent for a time, and though he still did not look at her he felt she was watching him. He seemed to feel her serene eyes, now growing accusing, scrutinizing his profile.

As always, he was being criticized. Of course he deserved it. But criticism from others had never made him feel as guilty and as worthless as he felt now.

If he had had intelligence enough to reform years ago, or if he had never got into the habit of stealing cattle, or even if he had had sense enough to get out of the game several months before he thought of coming to the Last Hope, he might now have been able to banish that feeling of guilt. Crimes com-

mitted and repented are not very heavy upon one's conscience.

"Templin," she said, interrupting his thoughts, "you know very well that I did n't—did n't kiss you the night you went to the cache."

"No, you did n't. But I 've told you I would n't hold you to that."

"You could n't very well hold me, Templin. You seized me so quickly that I could n't help myself. And you are very strong, Templin."

"I had n't noticed it," he said.

"Don't be sarcastic," she reproved. "You must know you are strong."

"All right."

"It was n't very nice of you to use your strength in that way, Templin. You almost crushed me."

"I 'm sorry. I was a fool."

"Yes, I believe you were. It would have been different if I had ever given you any cause to—to think as you did think, Templin. But I did n't give you any cause; I did n't provoke you. Did I?"

"I reckon not."

"What made you do it, Templin?"

"I don't know. I suppose it was because I was close to you. I lost my head."

"I shall see that you don't get close to me again."

"You don't need to worry, Miss Stanton."

If he had now looked at her he would have observed that her face was flaming and that her eyes had grown very gentle. She got up and walked to the screen-door. He heard the door open but did not look around. Then he was alone on the veranda.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TEST OF COURAGE

TEMPLIN did not see Lisbeth again that day. That was because he did not go into the house, even for supper. She came to the door and called him, and he answered that he was n't hungry.

He felt that he would not be long at the Last Hope now; and he did n't want to force his presence upon Lisbeth. His conversation with her had resulted in the conviction, to him, that Lisbeth did not care for him in the way he had wanted her to care; she had mocked him, had shown him that his hopes had been absurd and impossible.

It had been strange how he had clung to his hopes. He had known she did n't like him, even though she had succeeded in letting him know that she was grateful for what he had done. Still he had gone on hoping.

He was hoping no longer. He 'd stay, of course, until he had it out with Blaisdell, until he was convinced that Lisbeth would be safe. Then he 'd

get out of the country, carrying his ridiculous thoughts with him.

But, anyway, he had kissed her. That was something. Even though she had n't reciprocated, he 'd ride with a memory which he could treasure during the long hours when he would be alone.

And he had grown spiritually and morally since he had met Lisbeth. Until he had come to the Last Hope his regrets for the things he had done had n't bothered him very much. He had had no plan for the future, had contemplated nothing constructive.

Now he was thinking that perhaps he could change his mode of life, might remodel it, and he was beginning to feel ashamed of himself. His last talk with Lisbeth had done it, he believed. She had shown him in a way that had really been very gentle, and very kind, that he was n't worthy. His shame had been that he had realized the truth of her words, of the things her words had implied.

But he was n't so sure, after all. She had misunderstood him. It made no difference to him that he knew that a great many people were going about the world lamenting that they were misunderstood. He was n't lamenting. No one would ever know that he felt he had been misunderstood. Nor did he intend to play the martyr. Perhaps this mood

was merely temporary. As soon as he left the Last Hope behind he would be himself again.

At dusk he made a round of the Last Hope buildings. He stood near a corner of the corral fence scanning the faint horizons. Not a moving thing disturbed the desert; there was no motion anywhere.

He saw a light in the house, in the kitchen. He waited, watching, until he saw Lisbeth walk between the lamp and a window. Then he strode toward the house.

At the edge of the veranda he saw something glitter in the lamplight that issued from one of the kitchen windows. It was Kane's gun, which he had dropped when he had fallen into the dust at the veranda's edge. He stooped to pick it up, and a bullet droned over his head.

He heard it thud against the wall of the house, heard the distant report of the rifle.

From Big Sandy. Blaisdell had come that way. While he had been moralizing. The trouble was that Blaisdell was shooting at what he must have thought was a stranger. Templin was still attired in the Eastern clothing. But it was almost dark, and Blaisdell would n't be particular.

So ran Templin's thoughts as he dodged around the nearest corner of the house and ran to the rear

door. It was open. He slipped inside, into the kitchen, to see Lisbeth standing in the center of the room looking as if she were on the verge of fainting.

"Blaisdell!" he said shortly.

Not waiting for her to answer, he leaped to the lamp which sat on the kitchen table, blew out the flame, and seized Lisbeth. Swinging her off her feet, he carried her up the stairs and into Stanton's room.

"Lie down on the floor in the center of the room!" he ordered. "Get your father there, too! Don't move. No matter what happens, you are to stay right here!"

Her hands were on his shoulders. He could not see her face, but he knew by the steadiness of her voice that she was almost as calm as he.

"Are there many?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered. There was a strange leap in his voice; the muscles of his shoulders felt like iron to her fingers.

"My God!" she whispered, marveling. "I believe you like to fight! I believe you welcome this!"

"Sure!" he said. "This ends the waitin'. I 've fought this fight every day for more than a week!"

"You 'll be careful?" she said. "You won't take any chances such as you took this morning?"

"Not a chance," was his grim reply. "Get down on the floor," he added. "They know you are in the house because they must have seen your shadow through the kitchen windows. But they might shoot; there 's no telling." He again swung her off her feet and laid her down on the floor. She stayed. He went to the bed, lifted Stanton out of it, and placed him on the floor beside Lisbeth.

He felt Stanton stir.

"Blaisdell 's here," he said to explain his action.

"I heard the shot," said Stanton; "I heard you bring Lisbeth up. You 're a mighty good man to have around, Templin. Be careful. I 'm feeling pretty good. I 've got a rifle in my wardrobe. I 'll take a hand in this when I get a chance."

"If you draw their fire be sure to keep Lisbeth on the floor!" warned Templin. "If they get into the house you 'll not want to do any missin'!"

He stepped across the room, opened the door, and closed it behind him. They could hear him descending the stairs. After that there was a seemingly unending period when there came no sound at all.

Despite Stanton's protests, Lisbeth began to move away from his side. She was crawling toward a window.

"Don't!" warned Stanton. "They must be near

by now. If they see you they 'll shoot! They may think you are Templin!"

"Father, he can't fight those men alone!" she said firmly. "He 'd have no chance. They 'll kill him. After he is killed what would we do? We 'd have to fight! We may as well do it now and help him as much as we can."

"Templin won't take any unnecessary chances," Stanton told her. "This is n't the first fight he 's been in."

"It is fortunate for us that it is n't his first fight," she answered. "We ought to thank God that he came here. If it had n't been for him Blaisdell would have both of us by this time."

She did not continue toward the window. Stanton heard her opening the door of the wardrobe.

Lisbeth," he called sharply, "let that rifle alone!"

"I am going to help him," she said quietly. "It is n't fair! He 's doing this for us. He did not have to come here. He might have left the country. He was getting tired of living as he had lived. He told me so. Not in words, perhaps, but in other ways. His life means as much to him as ours does to us, even though he pretends it does n't!"

She moved to him and laid the rifle on the floor beside him.

"Use it if you think you are strong enough," she said, "or when you have to. It is n't likely they will get up-stairs, but if they do you may be able to help."

Silently she moved to the door; he heard the lock click softly as she went out.

When she reached the top of the stairs she saw there was no light below. The living-room was a black void. But she reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped upon the floor of the living-room, standing there for a little while in an attempt to locate Templin.

The darkness outside was not as intense as in the house. Through the windows of the living-room she could discern the dim tracery of the corral fence, and peering steadily through the living-room door out of one of the kitchen windows she could see the black bulk of the stable.

She moved toward the kitchen, thinking she would find Templin there. She had not taken half a dozen steps when she heard his voice, close to her shoulder.

"I told you to stay up-stairs!" he said sternly.

"I intend to stay here, Templin," she returned firmly. "This is my fight!"

She heard him laugh, lowly, vibrantly, with a note of strange exultation in his voice. It was the

first time—no, the second time—that she had known him to exhibit passion. The first time had been when he had kissed her.

She felt his hands on her shoulders—both hands. Gently he turned her so that she felt she was facing him.

The cold steel of a rifle-barrel pressed against her shoulder where his right hand rested. He had gone to his room for the weapon; he was holding it by the muzzle by a thumb and the index-finger.

"I won't argue with you," he said. "I did n't expect you 'd stay up-stairs. You are the bravest woman I ever met. But Blaisdell 's got some mighty dangerous men with him. Shootin' is their trade. Keep down as much as you can. Below the window-sills. If they get inside the house you hop up-stairs. If they get inside that will be your last hope. If I ain't around by then I expect you 'd better—" He paused; she felt his fingers tighten on her shoulder.

"I know," she answered quietly; "I know what you mean. Blaisdell will never take me; I shall not let one of them lay a finger on me while I live."

"I 'm to blame for this," he said. His voice was hoarse, regretful. "I ought to have sent Meeder for Norton long ago. I reckon I was too stubborn, as you said. I 've been stubborn all along."

She wanted to tell him that he had n't been stubborn, that she thought no man could have been more considerate or more self-sacrificing; but the regret in his voice had brought a queer constriction into her throat, so that words would not come. She stood silent as she felt his hands drop from her shoulders, stood where he had left her while he moved around the room and into the kitchen. After a long wait, when she began to fear that he had gone outside, she felt him near her again.

"Here is your rifle," he said. His voice was low, steady; and there was a note of command in it. "It ain't likely they 'll do any shootin' at the house, knowin' you are inside. But if you shoot, they 'll come right back at you, thinkin' mebbe you 're a man. Don't shoot unless you have to. Keep watchin' the rear of the house. If they do any sneakin' they 'll probably come that way. I 'm goin' out to try an' locate them."

Her voice came now with a gasp of apprehension for his recklessness.

"You won't go out there, Templin! I won't have it! You 'll be killed!"

"I reckon not," he said confidently. "It 's dark, an' I can keep myself mighty near invisible. I sized up the country pretty well the other day, an' I 'll know what I 'm doin' all the time."

"But if anything happens to you I won't know it, Templin!" she persisted. "If there is any shooting I shall be thinking you are the victim. Templin, I won't have it; I don't want you to go!"

"Shucks!" he said. "You 've been pretty brave. Don't spoil it now. I 'm sure goin'."

He was inflexible; she knew her objections were futile. But she caught his arms and held him tightly, shaking him a little.

"You 'll be careful, Templin?" she whispered. "Please, please be careful!"

"I ain't gettin' myself killed if I can help it," he said, laughing lowly.

His hands were again on her shoulders, for she had suddenly released her grasp and was standing with her head drooping forward. Feeling her close to him he was tempted, and for an instant his grip on her shoulders tightened.

But he had given his word that he would not again transgress; and his hands slid down her arms to her hands. He lifted both and kissed them. Then he dropped them and moved away.

For a time she stood waiting, expecting him to speak, to warn her that he was going. But no sound reached her. A silence, which grew deep and portentous, seemed to engulf her.

Several minutes passed. She felt she could no

longer endure the suspense. She called to him, saying lowly, quaveringly:

"Templin! Templin! Where are you?"

No sound came back. She was alone. For an instant she yielded to an abject terror and sank weakly down upon the lower step of the stairs.

She did not remain there long. She dared not play the coward when Templin was outside facing death for her.

So she got to her feet, found the rifle which he had stood in the corner nearest the kitchen door, and moved on her hands and knees to one of the kitchen windows, where she could see the big level that stretched into the luminous plains.

CHAPTER XXII

FOES IN THE NIGHT

TEMPLIN'S bedroom window had been open. After he left Lisbeth he went to the window and stood for some minutes peering outward, his head close to the casing.

Outside the window, and close to the wall of the house, were some bushes that fringed the Last Hope garden, the garden which had given Philippe Mendezo his tasks before he had chosen to make a fool of himself in the cholla-house.

Beyond the bushes stretched the garden itself. It was filled with low-growing vegetation; it was entirely possible for one of Blaisdell's men to conceal himself in it by lying down.

For a time Templin watched the bushes and the garden. He could barely see the outlines of the cholla-house, which was toward the front and at a little distance from the veranda, and he was convinced that Blaisdell's men had not yet surrounded the house. At any rate, Templin had to get out.

He opened the screen, which was hinged, and

gently swung it back against the wall of the house. For an instant he stood in the window opening, bracing himself for the shock of a bullet.

Nothing happened. He felt a fierce exultation as he threw one leg over the sill, paused an instant, and then slid to the ground. Flat on his stomach he wriggled to the shelter of the bushes fringing the garden. He crouched there for a time, intently peering into the somber darkness surrounding the house.

Nothing moved. From inside the house the darkness outside had not seemed so dense. Now that he was outside he discovered that he could see no better than when he had been inside. The glittering points of the stars gave forth a faint sheen of light, a luminous mist that swam high and did not penetrate the blanket of darkness that covered the earth.

Templin moved away from the bushes. He went through the garden, gained the dense blackness that hovered around the cholla-house. He circled the cholla-house. He carried his rifle by the middle, balancing it; he had drawn his six-shooter and kept it close to his side so that it might not come in contact with the bushes that grew close to the walls of the building.

There was no Blaisdell man in the vicinity of the

cholla-house. Templin stood near one of its corners, peering toward the ranch-house. He could discern its corners, the roof. He could make out the outlines of the veranda, and against the star-haze he could see the white, dry alkali level in front of the veranda. He was convinced that he could see any object that would attempt to move across the level toward the house.

Templin's chief reason for leaving the house was that he hoped by his absence to keep Blaisdell and his men away from it. They had seen him enter, or, rather, they had seen him run around a corner toward the rear, and they would naturally think he had gone into the house. They would surround the house as soon as possible, he thought; then they would wait for what they thought was a reasonable time, or until they lost patience, and then they would attack. An attack would mean getting Lisbeth into danger. If he could locate them before they attacked he could delay the attack upon the house.

The bullet they had sent after him had seemed to come from the direction of Big Sandy. His observations during the last few days had made him familiar with the river, and it was toward a wood that fringed it that he began to move when he decided that no one as yet had approached the house.

In order to cross an open stretch that began at

the edge of the garden and extended to the wood he had to resort again to wriggling on his stomach. It was a slow, tortuous method of travel, and when he reached the wood he drew himself to a sitting posture and rested. He did not move for several minutes, until he was certain that the wood concealed no man but himself. Then he went swiftly and noiselessly toward the sloping banks of the river.

It was while making his way through some brush along the top of the bank nearest the house that he heard a sound not made by himself. A low, peculiar whistle reached his ears. It seemed to him to be more than a signal; to his mind, alert to catch the significance of all things that came under his observation, the whistle sounded suspiciously like an inquiry.

He answered it, duplicating it with all the accuracy possible.

Immediately a voice reached him. It was low, guarded:

"Is that you, Borton?"

Templin waited. The real Borton might be near.

But there was no reply to the voice, and Templin whispered lowly:

"Yes."

"Wa-al, why in hell did n't you say so?" said the voice impatiently.

At a little distance from Templin, not more than a dozen yards, some brush crackled slightly, thus enabling Templin to locate the owner of the voice. If he had kept going along the bank of the river he would have stumbled upon the man.

"I 've been hearin' you," came the voice again, a low whisper. "How in hell did you git around thar so soon?"

Templin knew Borton; he also recognized the voice. It belonged to Keegles, perhaps the most cruel and ruthless member of Blaisdell's band. Keegles had always hated Templin; he would hate more when he discovered that Templin had killed Kelton, his friend—if he did not already know it.

Imitating Borton's voice to the best of his ability, Templin answered:

"Shut yore rank mouth. Some one will be hearin' you!"

"I ain't carin' a damn!" returned Keegles. "Blaisdell 's dead sure thet guy Templin went into the house. I ain't figgerin' thet way. Thet damned Templin ain't nobody's fool, even if he does look like one, an' I ain't admirin' to poke around hyar runnin' the risk of havin' him sneak up on me an' slittin' my windpipe. Templin would do it!"

"Sho," answered Templin.

There was a short silence. Then Keegle's voice again:

"I 'm comin' over, Borton."

Instantly the brush crackled again. The man's big bulk loomed out of the darkness, came toward Templin.

Templin stood erect, waiting. The man came nearer. His hands were stuck out in front of him as he groped his way along the bank. Lowly and viciously he was cursing the impeding brush and the precarious footing. He was mumbling profanely when he reached Templin and bumped into him.

"Why in hell did n't you keep a-callin'?" he demanded querulously. "I 've mighty near knocked my nose off runnin' into—"

Templin struck swiftly and truly with the butt of his six-shooter. Soundlessly the man lurched against him. Templin caught him lest he crash through the brush and arouse the curiosity of any other Blaisdell man that might be near. He laid the inert body down and crouched, listening.

"Who in hell 's makin' all that noise?" came another voice, seemingly from a little distance beyond the spot where Keegles's had come from before he had advanced to Templin's place of concealment.

The voice was Borton's. It was evident that he had not been close enough to hear the whispered conversation between Templin and Keegles.

Templin did not answer. He wanted to find Blaisdell, and he was reluctant to kill unless he was compelled to.

He had hit Keegles hard, and he had no doubt that he had killed him, but he could not continue that method of disposing of the outlaws he met. There was always the danger of missing a blow, and he could not expect every man he met to be as trusting as Keegles, or as easily fooled.

But if he should meet Blaisdell and kill him, the outlaws would undoubtedly withdraw, for he knew none of them were very enthusiastic over the thought of fighting him. He knew Keegles had voiced the opinion of the band.

He knew Borton well. He disliked the man. Borton was a talkative fool, blatant, irritatingly conceited. He was always meddling in things that did not concern him. He did n't want to get close to Borton, for Borton would insist upon talking. He 'd have to kill him.

Therefore Templin moved farther into the brush, toward the house. He dropped to his hands and knees beside a clump of manzanita, circled it, and

halted. Borton must have seen him, for his voice came again.

"That you, Keegles?" he said in a whisper. His voice was sharp, suspicious.

"Yes," replied Templin, imitating Keegles's voice. "Keep yore damned trap shet!"

Borton grunted, moved forward. Against the faint starlight Templin saw him rise out of some bushes. He was headed straight for the manzanita clump, guided by Templin's voice.

Templin did not rise. He was not as bulky as Keegles, and he felt Borton would recognize that fact and become suspicious too soon. If he kept down Borton would have to come close before he could see well enough to discover his mistake.

"I ain't likin' this job none," complained Borton when he had almost reached the manzanita bushes. "But I 'd sure admire to burn a hole through that damned Templin! I 'd have done it when he was goin' toward the house if he had n't got a notion to stoop an' pick up somethin'. Curious how that maverick gets out of things! Blaisdell would have plugged him long ago, he says, if he had n't wanted to watch him. Reckon Blaisdell thinks he 's a damned curiosity!

"Keegles, what in hell you doin' there, settin'

down? You scared Templin's goin' to pot-shot you from a window? Shucks! Templin 's takin' no chances. He sure knows us boys is out to get him for downin' Kelton!"

Borton had fired the shot, eh? They knew about Kelton. Givins or Stagg must have talked. They were out to get him. He knew that, had known they would try to kill him. But it was strange how the expressed intention irritated him. Borton had put it into words, had made it vital, imminent. Before Borton had spoken it had been merely a remote possibility.

Borton would n't be the one to do the killing! He had for once talked too much; he had literally talked himself to death.

Borton continued to move toward Templin. Templin did not move until he was close to him, until he was standing within arm's length, peering forward. Borton's eyes must have been exceptionally keen, for even though the darkness was dense there beside the manzanita bushes, he seemed to discover something strange in the appearance of the man he thought was Keegles.

"What in hell you wearin', Keegles?" he asked, his voice full of puzzled inquiry. "You look all white, kind of."

The herring-bone suit and the gray hat! Tem-

plin had forgotten them! The alkali dust he had wriggled through! He certainly would be visible to any one who looked closely at him.

He rose without answering.

"Hell, you ain't Keegles!" said Borton, startled.

Templin heard the slap of his hand against the leather of his gun-holster. He drew his own weapon, stuck it deep into Borton's stomach. The report was muffled by Borton's clothing. As Templin shot he grasped with his left hand at a faint glitter that came from Borton's side. Borton's gun went off, but the bullet went downward, for Templin's left hand had struck it, depressed its muzzle.

Borton pitched into the manzanita brush groaning. Templin ran toward the brush that fringed the edge of Big Sandy, leaped through it, and landed in the sand of the river-bed.

He ran up the bed of the stream, keeping in the shadow of the perpendicular bank on the side nearest the ranch-house. At a point where some gnarled trees overhung the bank he halted and reloaded his six-shooter. Above him along the bank he could hear the brush crackling, heard the voices of men.

He had diverted the attention of the outlaws. For some time they would not think of trying to enter the house. And if they found Borton before

the man died they would know an enemy was moving about among them.

Naturally their thoughts would go to Templin. They 'd be careful, suspicious of every moving or stationary blot they saw in the darkness. But, unless they stayed close together, they would hesitate to shoot for fear of hitting one another.

Templin did not believe they would draw together at once. It would be some time before news of what had happened to Borton would reach all of them, for the first man to reach Borton, if Borton could talk, would not recklessly expose himself.

It would be the same if Borton did not talk. The man who found him would understand that Borton had not shot himself, and no doubt they all knew that when Borton had shot at Templin the latter had gone around the rear of the house. Finding Borton shot would prove that Templin had not gone into the house but was moving about too closely for comfort.

Templin was reasonably safe as long as he did not get into the open. He meant to find Blaisdell.

He climbed the bank and sank upon his stomach under a low-hanging branch of one of the trees at the top.

There he waited. Here and there he could hear

a stealthy tread as some one moved about in the darkness. Once he caught an indistinct blur and knew he was looking at the shape of a man. But he could not shoot without betraying his place of concealment to his enemies.

Evidently they had discovered Borton. Voices came from the vicinity of the manzanita thicket, a loud groan. Borton was still alive; they had reached him; no doubt he had talked.

Templin was motionless for a time, trying to locate a voice that seemed to come from a point near him and slightly to his right, up the river. The voice sounded like Blaisdell's but was so low that Templin could not be certain. He meant to find out; so he crawled through some scattered sage-brush toward the spot from which the voice had seemed to come.

He was a long time in getting close enough to hear the voice distinctly, and when he did get close enough the voice seemed to move away. But not until he had caught one word:

"Templin."

The voice was Blaisdell's. Blaisdell, he supposed, had been informed of what had happened to Borton. Blaisdell would go to Borton. But the spot where the man had fallen would now be an exceedingly dangerous place to linger in. The out-

laws would search the vicinity, and their trigger-fingers would be nervously agitated.

He would stay away. If they could n't find him near the spot where Borton had fallen they would scatter. Then he might find Blaisdell.

Templin could see the house from where he had halted. He was screened by a big choya-bush around which grew a thicket of sage and ocatilla. It seemed to him that the darkness was not so dense, for the house was plainer in his vision, its outlines clearer than when he had looked at it from the cholla-house. Also, objects near him were becoming distinguishable.

His quest could not last much longer, for the moon was rising. Over southeastward he saw the mellow, effulgent glow which heralded its coming.

He had failed to consider two things, the moon and the Eastern clothing. It would not be long before it would be impossible for him to cross an open space without drawing the fire of his enemies. Much as he regretted it, the rest of his fighting would have to be done in the house. That was, of course, if he could reach the house without getting himself killed.

He meant to go back the way he had come. He crawled on his hands and knees through the sage until he regained the spot under the trees from which

he had heard Blaisdell's voice. Dropping to the bed of the river, he hugged the bank as he made his way toward the place he had landed when he had leaped from the bank immediately after shooting Borton. It was still dark along the bank, though he observed that he could now distinguish the windrows of sand in the bed of the river toward the middle.

He paused in the shelter of some overhanging weeds and listened. The hum of voices reached him. No doubt the outlaws were congregated about Borton. He could distinctly hear some of them, those whose voices were loudest.

"Hell, it was n't Templin, I tell you!" said one. "Borton says the guy wore store clothes, that he looked like a damned Eastern dude!"

"Borton hurt bad?"

"He 's cashed in! Hell! He was bored clear through! They found Keegles right over there with his head busted. He can't live, either. Seems to me that for an Eastern dude the guy which put them boys out of business must be a hell-roarer of a fighter. Unless he snuck up on 'em an' give it to them from behind!"

"You said Borton was shot through the stummick."

"Yes, that 's so. An' Borton's gun was let off."

Templin moved away. He stayed close to the bank, following the bed of the river until it brought him opposite the spot where he had first heard Keegles. Keegles's body had evidently been carried away, for there was no sign of him, and there were none of the outlaws visible in the vicinity.

Templin climbed the bank and dropped into a thicket close to its edge.

Straight ahead of him to the north he could now see the fringe of brush around the garden. The cholla-house was clearly outlined; a subdued light seemed to envelop it. The moon was casting its first faint light, and the roof of the ranch-house was bathed in it.

Templin would have to move fast if he expected to reach the house without being observed. But there was a clear sweep of open ground before him which he would have to cross as he had crossed before, by wriggling on his stomach. He had just dropped to the ground when a rifle crashed spitefully.

The report seemed to come from the rear of the ranch-house.

Templin leaped to his feet and bounded across the open toward the cholla-house. He had not taken twenty strides when crimson streaks of fire flashed from various coverts along the river-bank,

and bullets droned and whined past him as he ran. Had the light been better he might not have been able to reach the safety of the cholla-house.

But he made it, ran around it. Then he dropped to his hands and knees and started through the garden toward the window of his room.

Half-way through the garden he heard another shot from the house and then another. Followed a short silence, which was shattered by a woman's scream—high, shrill, expressing terror.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SHOWDOWN

TEMPLIN gave no further thought to concealment. He straightened and moved with long, swift leaps toward the window. Again crimson streaks stabbed the semi-darkness; he heard the thud and jar of bullets striking the wall of the house. One seared his flesh high up on the right shoulder as he leaped and dived head foremost through the rectangle of the window.

He landed on his hands and knees but was up in a flash and through the bedroom door into the living-room. It was dark in the room, and for an instant he stood, peering into the gloom around him.

Then he heard a sound that seemed to come from the kitchen, and he dimly discerned a black bulk that appeared to be moving. He drew his gun as he leaped forward, met a flame-spurt, felt his flesh again seared as though by a white-hot iron.

He dived toward the floor, striking upon his left shoulder. By the flame-spurt he had caught a flashing glimpse of a man's face, and as he struck

the floor he snapped a shot at the spot where the face had appeared.

He heard a grunt, a curse. The flame-spurt came again. But he had rolled out of line, and the bullet missed him. His own gun crashed again. He heard another grunt, muffled, guttural. Then a fall. And then a groan. A tense silence reigned.

He got to his feet and leaped into the kitchen. A gun roared from the floor, and he replied to it, shooting downward into a black shape.

There came another silence. He stumbled over something, kicked it out of the way. By the weight and length of the object, he judged it to be a rifle.

Lisbeth's?

He thought it was. He searched for her in the darkness, and found her lying on the floor near the man he had shot.

He knelt beside her and listened to her breathing. It was regular, though fast. He now heard voices outside, near the door; the reports of rifles, cries of anger.

He felt that Lisbeth had merely fainted; he could detect no wound.

"Lisbeth!" he whispered. "It 's all right; he 's gone!"

She moved, clung to him.

"Templin!" she said quaveringly. "Thank God, it 's you!"

She struggled, sat up; he could feel her shuddering as for an instant she remained passive in his arms. Then as though suddenly remembering what had happened, she fought to get to her feet, crying frenziedly:

"Blaisdell! He 's here! Two men came in. I shot. One called the other Blaisdell. Blaisdell went up-stairs while the other man held me. He 'll kill father; he 'll kill him!"

Templin released Lisbeth and ran toward the stairs. He heard her following; he knew she could not be kept back. He was up the stairs in half a dozen bounds. But at the landing he halted to stare in astonishment down the hall. The door of Stanton's room was partly closed; light streamed from between the door and the jambs.

There was sound in the room, but not the sort of sound that Templin had expected to hear when he reached the top of the stairs.

Voices reached his ears, Stanton's and Blaisdell's.

Templin did not stop to listen to them; he moved forward, pushed the door open. Before him, standing near the center of the room, was Blaisdell. Seated on the edge of the bed in which he had lain many days was Stanton.

Stanton's face was frightfully pale; his gaze was directed downward. His hands, extended on each side of him as though to brace his body against falling, were gripping the bedclothes. The rifle Templin had brought to him was lying on the floor at his feet.

Blaisdell was rigid, erect. His arms were folded over his chest; his head was bent forward a little, as though he were staring searchingly at the man seated on the bed in front of him.

Neither man appeared to know that Templin had entered the room; each was intent upon his thoughts.

Templin became conscious of a slight movement behind him; he felt a touch, a trembling touch on his arm, and knew that Lisbeth had come.

Silently he turned and drew her back along the hall.

"He 's all right," he assured her. "He won't be hurt. But Blaisdell 's lightning with a gun. If he starts to shoot, you 'll be in line. Go into your room and wait. It won't be long."

Silently she obeyed. Templin stood in the hall until she vanished through the dark doorway. For an instant he paused to listen to a strange tumult of sound outside, paused to smile grimly. Blaisdell's men were evidently shooting at one another, thinking they were shooting at Templin. Not all

of them had seen him leap through the open window.

He halted again in Stanton's room, just inside the doorway.

The men had not changed positions. But Blaisdell was talking.

"Where 's the letter, Stanton?" he said.

"I can't find it, Blaisdell."

Blaisdell laughed. "You 'll never be able to find a thing that has n't been lost!" he said. "Jefford never wrote such a letter. Stanton, I 'm going to kill you! Get up on your feet!"

Stanton rose, faced Blaisdell.

He was the Stanton Templin had seen when he had first reached the Last Hope. His eyes were steady. His face was white but alight with a high courage. Stanton was not guilty! A guilty man could not face death in that manner.

"All right, Blaisdell," he said, his voice low but unwavering; "I 'm satisfied. I suppose you think you are justified. And you 've got the advantage." He now smiled with strange mirthlessness. "It might have been different if that rifle had been loaded. I heard you coming; you would have died when you opened the door."

"God's way of squaring things, Stanton," said Blaisdell.

He dropped his hands to his sides. The right hand began to move upward, the elbow moving slowly back.

"Blaisdell!" Templin whispered the name.

Blaisdell stiffened. His right arm stopped moving, seemed to assume an iron-like rigidity. He drew a long breath. He made no attempt to turn.

Stanton's muscles had seemed to leap at the sound of Templin's voice; his eyes were aflame with a terrible joy as he stared at his deliverer. Then without uttering a sound he collapsed to the edge of the bed and sat there, his eyes closed, his body trembling.

"Damn you, Templin!" said Blaisdell. "Why do you interfere? I 'll kill you for this!"

"I 'll bore you if you move a finger, Blaisdell!" said Templin. "You 've been about to kill an innocent man. Twice Stanton 's told you about the letter Jefford wrote him; once when he was loco, an' now, when he 's in his right senses. If you had any sense you 'd believe him. Blaisdell, your judgment is warped because you 've been thinkin' about your vengeance. God does his own killin'; He 's got no authorized agents runnin' around with a gun correctin' wrongs.

"Since you 've been out in this country you 've done a damned sight more wrong than you accuse Stanton of doin'. If God was lookin' for some one to square an account for him I would say you 'd be the last man he 'd think of—an' then he 'd bust you one in the eye for presumin' to be worthy.

"I ain't doin' any preachin'; I 'm tellin' you a few things you don't seem to know. If you 're thinkin' of goin' on livin' you 're goin' to make some damned straight promises right now!" He closed the door behind him.

"What do you want me to promise, Templin?"

"That you 'll quit devilin' Stanton. That you 'll not bother his daughter; and that you 'll stick your head out of the window here an' tell your gang to hit the breeze back to the cache. You 'll stay here until I turn you loose."

Blaisdell's answer was a swift leap sidewise. The leap brought him close to the lamp, which was standing on the dresser. His left hand brushed against it. It crashed to the floor; its light flickered and went out as Blaisdell's gun roared, seemingly in answer to Templin's.

Blaisdell appeared to leap for the wall beside the dresser. But a shaft of clear light from the moon, which at last had risen, gleamed full upon him, disclosing a crimson splotch on his left cheek.

He seemed not to know that the moonlight was upon him, for he made no attempt to avoid it. His gun spouted fire in a continuing stream, the belching lances reaching toward Templin.

Templin was cooler, more deliberate. His first shot had seared Blaisdell's cheek. The second shot did not come until Blaisdell leaped into the patch of moonlight on the wall. The third, and the last in Templin's gun, came with the last roar of Blaisdell's weapon.

Blaisdell flattened against the wall, fairly in the patch of moonlight. His arms were extended, though drooping slightly. He seemed to be pinned against the wall. Then he dropped slowly, turning half around as he fell. He lay motionless, oddly huddled, in front of the dresser, where the moonlight did not strike him.

The door behind Templin opened, and Lisbeth stood in the opening. She saw Templin, a shadowy figure in the room, standing erect in its center. The light was not good, but she recognized him, ran to him.

"Norton is here!" she cried; "Norton and a posse! And Dr. Meeder!"

She had reached Templin's side; she saw his face. It was ghastly pale, but there was an ironic smile on his lips.

"Then I reckon we 'll be thankful for both," he said.

He reeled, and she threw her arms around him. But he was too heavy. He slipped from her grasp and went down gently, as though tired to the point of exhaustion.

CHAPTER XXIV

A NEW DEAL

TEMPLIN'S thoughts were all of the past. The events of the last few weeks would be his memories to-morrow. He 'd have time to go over them thoroughly, to bring each incident forward and examine it. He 'd have some pleasant memories, some that were not so pleasant. But he 'd have them.

Also, he 'd have a new knowledge of women. He 'd never realized how desirable women were until he found he could not have the one he wanted. He 'd never want another. If he could n't have the one he wanted he 'd have none. No second choice for him.

He 'd come pretty near dying. He knew that. Six wounds. He did n't believe Blaisdell had given him all of them, though he had felt several strike. Blaisdell had been almost too quick for him. In that test which long had been threatened he had pretty near lost. Well, that was past.

Blaisdell was dead; Norton's posse had caught a

number of the remaining members of the band; they had found the bodies of Borton and Keegles and the man in the kitchen, who had held Lisbeth while Blaisdell had gone up-stairs to kill Stanton. The outlaws who had got away would probably scatter. Blaisdell, the guiding spirit, had held them together.

Stanton and Dr. Meeder had spent a lot of time with Templin. Lisbeth, too, had seemed to hover around quite a little. They all had treated him with much consideration and gentleness.

That was all right. He expected that. But the thing he wanted he could n't get.

Lisbeth had n't told him that directly. He had overheard it. It had been while he had been lying in Stanton's room in a state of semi-consciousness. They had thought him unconscious. They were standing in the doorway, talking about him.

Perhaps they had been talking for some time. He did n't know. The first words he had heard were in Meeder's voice.

"Oh, he 'll get well. There 's no doubt of that. Strong constitution."

"Father will have to treat him well, will reward him."

That was Lisbeth.

"Reward him? Do you mean your father will

give him a job? Or money? Shucks! What do you think he came over here for?"

"I don't know, doctor."

Lisbeth again.

"You 'll have to know, Miss Stanton. If I am not mistaken he 'll tell you when he gets well. But don't tell me you have n't seen some signs that he loves you!"

"He is an outlaw, Dr. Meeder. What would people say?"

"The world—people! Shucks! What do people always say? Some would condemn, others would applaud. If they knew Templin as I know him, as you know him, they 'd do no criticizing."

"I sometimes think I am afraid of him, doctor."

"I suppose that 's natural. He 's got a bad reputation. But I don't think his heart has been in the business. He never killed anybody for the love of killing, so far as I have been able to determine. And he 's more of a man right now than a number of men who would profess to be horror-stricken over the things he 's done."

"But he has been in the habit of stealing cattle. He told me that."

"That 's not a heinous crime. A great many of the big owners, who would hang Templin if they

could catch him, are guilty of the same offense. The difference is that the big men don't make a profession of stealing."

Templin heard no more of the conversation. When he again opened his eyes Lisbeth and the doctor were gone.

He had heard enough. If Lisbeth loved him she would have defended him. She knew he loved her, for in her conversation with Meeder she had tacitly admitted it.

He had avoided her after he got up. He would n't put himself in her way. For three weeks he had kept out of her sight as much as possible. To-night he was standing near the far end of the pasture fence staring at the darkening western horizon.

There was a light in the kitchen of the ranch-house. Lisbeth was there. Getting supper, he supposed. He was n't hungry. He 'd not bother Lisbeth any more. Nor Stanton.

He did n't belong here. He never would belong. Concede that Lisbeth loved him, would marry him? Happiness for a while. She 'd begin to see that she had made a mistake.

Of course, he 'd always be gentle and considerate with her, but being gentle and considerate would n't

wipe away the blot on his life. She 'd always be thinking of it; he would see little furrows in her brows at times, and he would n't dare to ask her why they were there. He 'd know. She 'd be embarrassed before people who might chance to visit them; she 'd think people were talking about her.

Suppose a child came. A girl. Say a boy. What would be the difference? People would point the child out, and that would hurt Lisbeth.

It would be hell; that was all there 'd be to it! Son of Ned Templin, the outlaw. Daughter of Ned Templin, the outlaw. Same thing.

The laws of life were inexorable. He 'd done some sacrificing in his time. He 'd not ruin any one's life. Not Lisbeth's, anyway. He'd sneak off.

He made his preparations very deliberately. He walked around the pasture fence to the stable. He stood for a little while in the door watching the house, his throat curiously constricted. It was something like the feeling that had come over him when he had left home.

No home cheer for him. No intimate association with friends. No relatives betraying concern or even interest in his welfare.

He got his saddle and bridle off their pegs. He carried them to the corral fence and hung them on a post while he uncoiled his rope.

He looked at the horses in the corral. He 'd take the black he had ridden to Wilcox and to the cache. Stanton could n't object to that, as it had been with the black that he had saved Stanton from Blaisdell, and Stanton ought to be thankful enough to let him have the horse. Besides, he was leaving the roan horse.

He was curious about his feelings at this moment. How scrupulously honest he had become! In the old days he would have taken the black horse without a thought of the fairness of the thing. But not now. He did n't want to make Lisbeth feel bad; did n't want her to think ill of him.

He roped the black, put saddle and bridle on him, swung up, and rode down along the corral fence toward Big Sandy. As he rode he kept looking back to see if he was observed. But no one was looking. Meeder had gone back to town several days ago; Norton and his posse had stayed for two days, scouring the country for the remnants of the Blaisdell band.

And Norton had made proper apologies for suspecting him of the killing of Putt and Barkwell. Norton had thanked Stanton when the latter con-

fessed. Stanton had saved him a job, though he was amazed to hear that Putt and Barkwell had been members of the band.

The light was still in the kitchen. Stanton and Lisbeth were invisible. After a while they 'd call him. Maybe the fact that he did n't come in for supper would n't surprise them. During his convalescence his appetite had n't been normal. He 'd missed a great many meals.

But in the morning, when they called him and he did not respond, they would look into his bedroom, to find that the bed had not been slept in. Then they would look over the horses in the corral, to find the black missing.

Perhaps they 'd be glad to get rid of him. All right. But his heart was heavy as he crossed Big Sandy and headed the black westward. Two hours later he was sitting motionless in the saddle on the brow of a hill staring at the moon-lit plains below.

He 'd followed the best course, he knew. He could n't have faced Lisbeth to say good-by to her. He 'd have made a fool of himself—he who had always taken pride in his self-control. Better to go away without saying anything. No heartaches then; only his own.

Down around the base of the hill he rode into a little wood. He went up again, to a bench. He

again halted. He had n't been making much time. But it was just as well. He had no destination; no one was expecting him.

He sat there long, watching the plains below, noting how the moonlight played on the peaks of some distant mountains and illuminated the dark bases of the foot-hills. There was sadness in the scene, a somber beauty and dignity, a colossal mysticism that baffled the mind of man.

He rode on. As he rounded the bench which he had been riding he saw a sinuous white line winding northward. It was a trail that led to the cache. Back farther other trails merged into it. He had ridden it many times; he would never ride it again.

But he wanted to take a last look at it, and so he rode downward, then upward, along a broad shelf that led around the shoulder of a hill. He heard a sound on the trail ahead, and pulled the black down, to let him go forward at a walk. He had to swing wide to avoid a jutting shoulder. And then the wide white trail was straight ahead of him, shining like silver in the moonlight.

He halted the black, straightened in the saddle, caught his breath sharply. Amazed, incredulous, he leaned forward. There could be no mistake. Sitting quietly on a horse not more than twenty or

thirty feet distant, directly in the middle of the trail where the silvery moonlight streamed down into her face, was Lisbeth Stanton!

And now he felt suddenly guilty. He sat looking at her, saying nothing. She rode forward, halted her horse close to his, and looked at him.

"Templin," she said, very gently, "why did you try to run away without letting me know?"

"It was time to quit botherin' you," he answered. "There 's nothin' at the Last Hope for me."

"Nothing, Templin?" she said, gentle mockery in her voice. "Not even me?"

"I 'd lost hope of that," he said. "I heard you tellin' Doc Meeder that you were afraid of me."

"Oh, that!" she said with a hysterical little laugh. "I remember that conversation. I was trying to justify you, Templin, trying to put myself in the place of people who—who might criticize. I—I could n't do it, Templin; I could n't consider you so—so cold-bloodedly.

"Why, can't you see, Templin? I 've come all this distance after you! I saw you bring your saddle and bridle out, saw you catch up the black horse, saw you ride away without—without saying anything to anybody. Do you think I would have come if—if—"

His hands were upon her shoulders; his eyes were

alight with an amazement so great that it made her smile, even though she wanted to cry with joy over the knowledge that at last he was beginning to understand.

"Lisbeth," he said steadily, "you know what I am—what I 've been. I 've been seein' things differently of late. Since I first saw you. I 've been bad. Maybe I 'll stay bad. When things don't suit me there 's a fire in me that starts to roarin', an' I can't stop it. Knowin' that, you 're willin' to—"

"I 've come all this distance for you, Templin," she said. "Are you afraid to—to try to go as great a distance for me?"

"Afraid!" he said. "Yes," he added; "I 'm afraid of you, afraid that I 'll never be able to be the man you ought to have! Lisbeth," he added as he leaned closer, "I 'll try mighty hard."

"And I will help you, dear," she said. "Between us perhaps we can do things in the world that will help to compensate for the past."

"Perhaps," he answered.

They sat for a little while on the silvery trail above the plains, and then at last they rode downward, along the trail that led toward the Last Hope. Both were upon the black horse, for those who love

must needs be close together; while Lisbeth's horse, having assisted in accomplishing what his mistress had set out to accomplish, was rewarded with a free rein and the sweet grasses that grew beside the trail.

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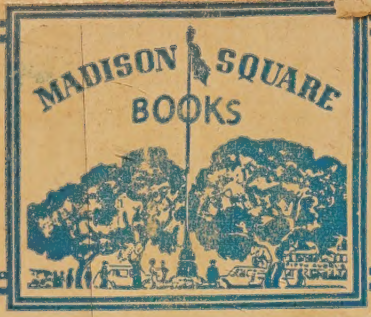

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